

BRIEFLY

Polish soldier dies in Kosovo blast:

A Polish peacekeeping soldier was killed and four others injured Saturday by an accidental bomb explosion in Kosovo, a spokesman for the international peacekeeping force (KFOR) said. AFP reports from Pristina.

The accident happened at the southern Kosovo village of Djeneral Jankovic, near the border with Macedonia, the spokesman said. He said that no more details could be released until the commander of the Polish forces authorised it.

Rebels bomb Indian railway station:

Maoist guerrillas carried out a bomb attack on a railway station in southern India Sunday in retaliation for the killing of three fellow rebels by police, the United News of India reported. AFP reports from New Delhi.

Rebels of the People's War Group (PWG) bombed Rajampet station in the state of Andhra Pradesh on Sunday morning, police said. They said eight activists herded the station master and other officials out of the station before blasting it.

Bombay slum fire kills girl:

A seven-year-old girl died Saturday and about 4,500 huts were destroyed when a major fire swept through Asia's largest slum in the western Indian city of Bombay, the Press Trust of India reported. AFP reports from New Delhi.

The fire in the sprawling shantytown of Dharavi in central Bombay broke out around 9:45 a.m. (1015 BST), police said. Fire brigade officials said the cause of the fire and the extent of the damage were still unclear.

Russia urges residents to flee Grozny

MOSCOW, Dec 12: Russian commanders today ordered a pause in the fierce pounding of Grozny, instead bombarding the beleaguered Chechen capital with leaflets urging fighters to surrender and civilians to leave the city, reports said, reports AFP.

Federal warplanes and helicopter gunships flew low over Grozny, showering the city with leaflets mentioning two safe corridors set up by besieging Russian forces to shepherd civilians out of the rebel capital.

The pamphlets ordered the guerrillas defending Grozny to lay down their arms, Russian news agencies and television reported.

Moscow opened up safe-passage corridors out of Grozny via Pervomayskaya (northwest) and Alkhan-Yurt (southwest) following international outrage at Russia's threat to annihilate anyone left in Grozny after Saturday.

Military leaders said the intense bombardment of Grozny would be suspended until mid-night Sunday, while Emergency Minister Sergei Shoigu said a ceasefire from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. daily would allow civilians to leave unharmed.

Federal government troops said 700 civilians crept out of Grozny overnight via the northern escape route, state-owned ORT reported. But Moscow-run TV Centre said only 180 people had left Grozny in the last 24 hours, none via the Alkhan-Yurt corridor.

An ultimatum to Chechen guerrillas to lay down their arms has also been extended by a few days, ORT reported, citing military officials. The defence ministry was not available to confirm the report.

An estimated 40,000 Chechens remain trapped in Grozny, spending most of their time cowering in underground

cellars from the terrifying Russian blitz.

Many could be unaware of Moscow's offer of safe passage, but a series of attacks on refugee columns has also made many ordinary Chechens mistrustful of Moscow's guarantees.

Russia has set up a reception camp for ordinary Chechens exiting Grozny via the northern route in the town of Znamenskoye, where a tent city can cater for up to 2,500 people, TV Centre reported. So far only 150 Chechens are at the camp.

Despite the concession to Western opinion, the commander of Russian troops in the North Caucasus, General Gennady Troshev, warned that "the anti-terrorist operation will be taken to its logical conclusion," ORT quoted him as saying.

His troops would continue to use night-time strikes by helicopter gunships against rebels after a series of successful operations, ORT said.



Russian soldiers take rest between combat actions in a district of Chechen town of Shali, 20 km southwest from Grozny, on Saturday. Russian forces continue artillery shelling of Shali outskirts, trying to force terrorists to leave this town. — AFP photo

Uncertainty prevails over smooth transition of power in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 12: Malaysia's veteran prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, has predictably won a fifth mandate, but no one knows if there will be a smooth transition of power in his last term in office, reports Reuters.

The 73-year-old Mahathir, Asia's longest serving elected leader after 18 years in power, said last week he does not see himself staying a sixth term.

His United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) is due to hold leadership elections two years before his mandate expires in 2004 — once in mid-2000 and again in 2003.

Traditionally, UMNO's deputy president succeeds the president to become prime minister, and Mahathir has said his Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would normally be his heir.

But Mahathir has cast aside three heir-apparents, including Anwar Ibrahim, who was sacked after five years on the job and later jailed for corruption.

Critics say the prime minister's influence over UMNO may have taken a hit after his party lost more than one fifth of its seats in parliament in the November 29 snap polls.

Mahathir's Barisan Nasional coalition won a three-quarters majority in the 193-member lower house of parliament.

But UMNO took 72 seats, down from 94 in the outgoing parliament, as the Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) made inroads into the Malay heartland in northern Peninsular Malaysia.

"Mahathir's position has been greatly weakened after this election, and I don't think he can exert authority as nobody is going to listen to him,"

former opposition chief Lim Kit Siang said. "This coming UMNO election could be anybody's game."

The 60-year-old Abdullah has earned the tag of "Mr Clean" for his straightforward approach to politics. His tenure at the Foreign Ministry, where he served before being promoted last January, burnished his stature as a statesman.

But critics say he lacks the political kick instinct.

"The problems with Abdullah Badawi taking over from Mahathir is whether he can stand a challenge to the post," said Rustam Sami, a political commentator and opposition supporter.

Nepal's ruling party wins all 3 seats in by-polls

KATHMANDU, Dec 12: The ruling centrist Nepali Congress party has made a clean sweep of the three seats up for grabs in parliamentary by-elections, an Election Commission spokesman said today, reports Reuters.

The Congress party wrested the third parliamentary seat, the Rautahat Four seat, from the opposition Communist United Front Marxist-Leninist (UML) party, the election commission said.

The Congress party's victory in the two other seats were announced on Saturday. The party won the Morang One seat and snatched the Jhapa Six seat in east Nepal from the UML.

"All three seats have been won by the Congress," the spokesman said.

Nepalis voted on Thursday in the parliamentary by-elections.

Taiwan-China ties shadowed by arms race

TAIPEI, Dec 12: An arms race is developing between Taiwan and China after Taipei said it wants to develop long-range ground-to-ground missiles to counter its rival, analysts warned today, reports AFP.

Vice President Lien Chan on Wednesday spelled out for the first time Taiwan's desire to develop strategic weaponry amid reports of a fresh Chinese arms buildup.

"The ongoing political stand-off and an arms race across the Taiwan Strait could be further exacerbated," said Lin Yu-fang, professor of Tamkang University's Graduate Institute of International Affairs and Strategic Studies.

"As a matter of fact, an arms

race is going on. Not long after Taiwan said it wanted to be armed with an anti-missile shield, the mainland also unveiled its plans of building anti-missile capability," he told AFP.

Taipei-Beijing ties have hit their lowest level in three years after Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui defined the cross-strait links as a "special state-to-state relationship" in July.

In his address to a military seminar, Lien, who is running for the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) in the nationalist island's second direct presidential polls due in March, said Taiwan needs a deterrent which could strike back after a blitz from China.

To deter China, Lien said "the naval and air force must be strengthened... and long-range ground-to-ground missiles developed."

Professor Jia Qingguo of Beijing University told the Taipei-based China Times earlier this week "if Taiwan decides to develop missiles that could strike most of the mainland, an arms race would be inevitable."

He said he realised Beijing could boost its pre-emptive strike capability should Taiwan struggle to develop a second-strike force.

Alerted by Lien's statement, the US State Department voiced concerns Thursday calling for

restraint and peace dialogue.

Lien said he hoped it was merely "language for elections". Some analysts argue Lien stands to benefit in the election if it is held amid an atmosphere of tension with China.

It was generally agreed Beijing's sabre-rattling in the Taiwan Strait ahead of the island's first presidential polls in 1996 helped the KMT candidate Lee Teng-hui, the first Taiwan-born president since the Nationalist party fled to the island at the end of a civil war in 1949.

Beijing lobbed ballistic missiles into shipping lanes off the island in 1996 and the crisis did not end until Washington sent two battle carrier groups near Taiwan.

Israel puts off Palestinian prisoner release

JERICHO, West Bank, Dec 12: Israel has told the Palestinians it will free no more prisoners from its jails until after Prime Minister Ehud Barak returns from Washington this week, a Palestinian official said today.

"This is regrettable, they were supposed to be released before Ramadan," senior negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP, referring to the month of Ramadan which began Thursday.

Erakat said he was notified that an Israeli cabinet meeting Monday to discuss the prisoner release called for in September's Sharm el-Sheikh interim peace accord was cancelled because Barak was ill with flu.

Barak's government has already freed a total of 350 Palestinian prisoners in two stages in line with the Sharm accord and was due to release a further undetermined number for Ramadan.

The prime minister is to leave for Washington on Tuesday for the start of ground-breaking talks the following day with Syria and is expected back in the country on Friday.

The Haaretz newspaper, meanwhile, said that for the first time prisoners from east Jerusalem would be among the dozens to be freed.

Mexican university students clash with police

MEXICO CITY, Dec 12: Students from the Autonomous University of Mexico City (UNAM) clashed with anti-riot police on Saturday in front of the US embassy, where authorities said the protesters had damaged property, reports AFP.

Several people were injured in the clash, but police did not specify how many.

The students had marched to the US embassy to protest neo-liberal economic policies and the repression of protesters in Seattle during the World Trade Organisation's ministerial meeting that ended one week ago.

The students belong to a group of strikers who have paralysed the university since April 20 in protest of increased annual fees. The fees were dropped, but students then added new demands, such as an end to entrance exams.

UNAM is Latin America's largest university, with about 300,000 students.



Iranians hand in their candidacy yesterday, the first registration day for Iran's key parliamentary elections in February, at the interior ministry in Tehran. A total of 324 people, including seven women, have already applied. — AFP photo

'Settlers must leave homes in Golan if peace made with Syria'

TEL AVIV, Dec 12: Israeli Finance Minister Abraham Shohat said yesterday night that thousands of settlers would have to leave their homes in the Golan Heights if peace is achieved with Syria, reports Reuters.

We must remember that a peace like this, unfortunately, will be painful for the population of thousands who in large part will have to leave their homes," Shohat told businessmen from around the world at the opening of the Israel Business Conference.

"We also know that on the Golan there are thousands that know and understand that if we indeed achieve peace with Syria... there will be no choice and the price will be a very heavy human one."

Prime Minister Ehud Barak was also supposed to address the conference but cancelled due to illness, organisers of the conference said. Barak has been suffering from flu.

Talks between Israel and

Syria are due to resume in Washington next week after a break of almost four years. Syria says its peace talks will be based on Israel's full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, captured by Israel from Syria in the 1967 Middle East war.

As Shohat spoke in Tel Aviv, hundreds of the 17,000 Golan settlers gathered in the main Jewish settlement of Katzrin to voice opposition against what they expect will be Barak's return of all of the strategic plateau to Syria.

US President Bill Clinton announced on Wednesday that he would host the first Israeli-Syrian direct talks in nearly four years.

The upcoming meeting of Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara will be at the highest level in more than half a century of conflict.

Opinion polls show Israelis are split down the middle on whether to withdraw fully from the Golan.

LTTE claims capture of key coastal bases

COLOMBO, Dec 12: Tamil Tiger rebels today said they had captured two strategic coastal bases from the defence ministry in northern Sri Lanka amid ferocious battles that inflicted heavy casualties on both sides, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said over its clandestine Voice of Tigers radio that rebels took Vettalaikerni and Kaddaikkadu bases following an intense offensive launched on Saturday.

There was no immediate reaction from the defence ministry to the latest rebel claims. Kaddaikkadu, Vettalaikerni and a third base, Pullaveli, all form part of the defences of the key Elephant Pass garrison in the Jaffna peninsula.

The rebel radio, monitored in the northern town of Vavuniya, gave no details of casualties.

But the defence ministry said Saturday that the military had killed 230 rebels in the attacks. Ministry sources placed government losses at 10 soldiers

killed and 90 wounded.

Earlier, according to press reports, the army had resisted three assaults by Tamil rebels to overrun Elephant Pass.

The privately-owned Sunday Times said the rebels mounted three abortive attempts to attack the base but were repulsed by aircraft and navy gunboats.

The defence ministry said: "As per reports received so far, over 230 terrorists have been killed and a large number wounded."

Ministry spokesman Sunil Theerakod said eight soldiers were killed and another 90 wounded while repulsing the rebel assault on the military defences at the southern sector of the Jaffna peninsula.

The defence ministry said its defences in the security forces complex in Kaddaikkadu, Pullaveli and Vettalaikerni were intact.

But the Tigers said their units had penetrated all three.

In a statement sent here from their London office, the

LTTE also placed their losses at only 15.

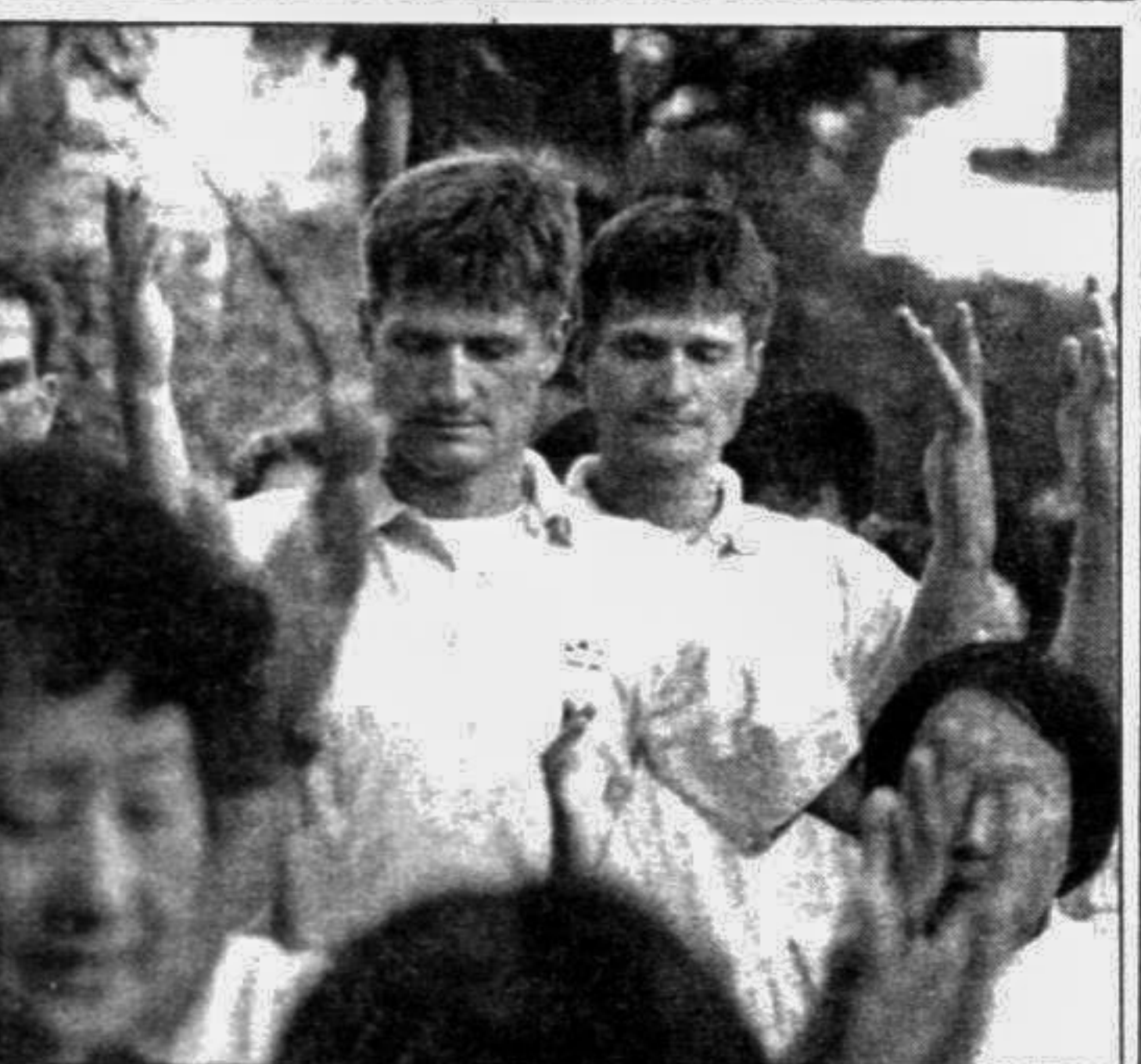
They added they had launched a multi-pronged assault on several sectors of the Elephant Pass base, pounding it with artillery and mortar rounds after imposing a siege.

"The LTTE wishes to deny categorically the government's claim that over 200 of our cadres have been killed at Vettalaikerni," the LTTE statement said.

"This is part of the malicious disinformation campaign of the Sri Lankan military to prop up the declining morale of the Sinhala soldiers and to cheat the Sinhala populace."

There were no immediate reports of fresh fighting Sunday.

The Tigers said the latest offensive was part of the campaign they launched last month when they scored spectacular gains by overrunning 10 government bases in the north of the country in just five days.



Falungong practitioners from Australia perform their spiritual exercises in Hong Kong yesterday, on the second day of their gathering in Hong Kong. AFP photo

Amid Indo-Pak tension, South Asia's future looks difficult

ISLAMABAD, Dec 12: After a year which brought Pakistan and India closer to war than at any time in the past three decades, South Asia faces an uncomfortable future of military tension and political division, reports AFP.

The world's two newest nuclear powers are barely on speaking terms. Afghanistan is gripped by UN sanctions. Sri Lanka's civil war has descended into a bloody new stage and Bangladesh is riven with political feuding.

High in the snow-capped peaks of Kashmir, Indian troops battled hundreds of Pakistan-backed Muslim guerrillas along the Line of Control dividing the state.

Over 10 weeks more than 1,000 people died, victims of a bitter territorial row unresolved since independence five decades ago.

"There is a long history of hostility, animosity and unhealthy competition," said

Hamid Gul, a retired general and former head of Pakistan's military intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence.

"It is not going to be washed away."

Full-scale war was averted this time but the fighting effectively tore up a landmark declaration of friendship India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif had painstakingly created.

It also spelt the end of Sharif's political career and may have cost him his life.

Pakistan's army, unhappy at the international support India won, unseated Sharif in a military coup on October 12. The former premier now faces a trial for treason and conspiracy to murder and if convicted may face the death penalty.

For Vajpayee, the conflict helped secure victory in elections in September and October, bringing the worst defeat in history for Sonia Gandhi's

Congress party. But his ruling coalition remains fragile and riven with factions.

Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has still not met Vajpayee and suddenly relations are cold again. Kashmir is the insurmountable hurdle once more.

"India must give Pakistan

sure from the West.

Many in the country fear the United States is tilting gradually more towards India and recoiling from an apparent rise in Islamic extremism in Pakistan.

"India is eclipsing Pakistan as an American ally," said Agha Shahi, a former Pakistani foreign minister.

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the opportunity to think by and for itself," said former Indian foreign secretary S.K. Singh.

"We should protect our international border and the Line of Control (dividing Kashmir) and be firm about extending Pakistan strict and precise reciprocity."

Islamabad has warned if New Delhi conducts another nuclear test it will go ahead with its own and there are few signs of a return to democracy in Pakistan, despite heavy pres-

US President Bill Clinton has said he wants to visit India in his last year in power, but may be reluctant to visit Pakistan and be seen condoning the coup.

In neighbouring Afghanistan the United Nations imposed aviation and financial sanctions on November 14, because the ruling Taliban militia refused to hand over indicted terrorist Osama bin Laden.

Many aid workers fear more international sanctions may now

IRA to hand over first weapons by mid-Jan

LONDON, Dec 12: The IRA has told the head of the commission set up to supervise paramilitary disarmament in Northern Ireland that it will start decommissioning within five weeks, according to press reports on Sunday, says AFP.

The Sunday Telegraph said that the IRA's (Irish Republican Army) intermediary had told Canadian General John de Chastelain in private talks that it would start disarming by January 16.

The Observer also reported a mid-January start.

But the paramilitary group gave no guarantees that the disarmament process would be completed by the mid-May deadline set by the Good Friday accord.

The Sunday Telegraph said the IRA, which has fought for an end to British rule over the province, had refused proposals of a symbolic handover of weapons on January 1.

If decommissioning does

start then, it will be a huge boost for Protestant Unionist leader David Trimble.

He only persuaded his party to let the IRA's political wing Sinn Fein into government earlier this month by promising to resign in February if there had been no verifiable start to disarmament by then.

The Sunday Telegraph named the IRA's intermediary to the disarmament body as Padraic Wilson, who was sentenced to 24 years in jail in 1993 after being caught with an under-car bomb in Belfast.

De Chastelain on Friday issued an upbeat assessment of the decommissioning process after meeting representatives of all the main paramilitary groups.

Meanwhile, the Sunday Telegraph and Observer said former Northern Ireland secretary Mo Mowlam had sanctioned the bugging of a vehicle Sinn Fein leaders used during peace talks earlier this year.

Indonesian president appeals for peace in Ambon

AMBON, Indonesia, Dec 12: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid visited the ravaged capital of the fabled spice islands today and called on local Muslims and Christians to end bloody sectarian clashes that have killed hundreds, reports Reuters.

Wahid and Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri held a closed meeting with local community and religious leaders in Ambon, capital of the Moluccas island, to discuss ways of resolving the conflict.

"What has happened in the Moluccas is a great tragedy but can be overcome," Wahid said

in a speech at the office of the province's governor ahead of the meeting.

"The people of the Moluccas must look for a better future and forget the past. It is important for them to settle their own problems by themselves. The government can only help."

Security was tight in the city, much of which has been reduced to ruins by months of clashes.

Wahid and Megawati were ferried into Ambon on a navy transport ship rather than travel by road due to security reasons.

Clinton, Mandela talk on Middle East peace

ORLANDO, Fla., Dec 12: President Bill Clinton and former South African president Nelson Mandela discussed the Middle East peace process on Saturday on the eve of ground-breaking talks between Israel and Syria in Washington, reports BSS.

Mandela, who has been seeking to play a major role in the Middle East peace process since leaving office in June, flew to Florida to urge Clinton to do all he could to accomplish a breakthrough.

Clinton met South Africa's elder statesman in the faintly surreal atmosphere of Disney World where the US president was attending a Democratic political gathering.

In a 45-minute breakfast meeting, Clinton "filled President Mandela in on what's been going on in the Middle East," according to White House spokesman Barry Toiv.

"And President Mandela urged him to really try and accomplish something in the last

year of his presidency because he feels that President Clinton can really play a vital role," Toiv told reporters.

"We agreed on the major points," regarding Middle East peace negotiations, Mandela said as he left the talks with Clinton, walking through a hotel lobby that reeked a Florida beach tent motif with a huge Christmas tree ringed by an outside toy electric train.

Mandela, who travelled to Florida for the meeting after a three-day trip to Seattle, said in Cape Town on Monday that he wanted to discuss his own Middle East peace initiatives with Clinton. There has been speculation, which Mandela has refused to comment on, that he had been trying to arrange an Israeli-Syria summit.

Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak are scheduled to hold peace talks next week in Washington to try to resolve their 32-year-old dispute over control of the Golan Heights.

follow.

The Taliban, who control most of the country but have no seat at the UN, are becoming pariah rulers but still find loyal support in Pakistan. And that support, some fear, could trigger a potentially bloody rise in right-wing fundamentalism in Islamabad.

"The pendulum of public support and sympathy will shift to the right wing because of the UN sanctions," said Gul, Pakistan's former military intelligence chief.

"That will put the military rulers under some kind of pressure."

Across the border, India has plenty of its own problems to deal with, not least the major aid operation needed in Orissa, where nearly 10,000 people died in a cyclone in October.

Elsewhere across the subcontinent New Year celebrations will be overshadowed by war and unrest.

In Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tiger guerrillas, in their battle for an independent territory, captured more than 10 key military bases in just five days in November.

Those humiliating losses for the government came just weeks ahead of a presidential vote, which President Chandrika Kumaratunga called early hoping to halt her party's declining fortunes.

Her re-election now looks as uncertain as a solution to the civil war which has claimed more than 55,000 lives in the past 27 years.

And in Bangladesh, political feuding threatens to unsettle Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Her opponents have united in a long campaign to push out the government.

For a region that won its independence from British colonial rule just five decades ago, the new millennium will bring little of the hoped for peace and prosperity.