

6 cops among 12 killed in Naxalite violence in Bihar

PATNA, Dec 24: Outlawed Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) has killed 12 persons, including six police personnel in a landmine blast, in South Bihar's Chhara and Hazaribagh districts since Wednesday, officials sources said here last night, reports PTI.

Five Bihar Military Police (BMP) jawans and an officer were killed in a landmine blast by MCC ultras at a place about six km from Kunda police station in dense forests yesterday.

In another incident, six tribals, including a woman were killed by the outfits in Jharpa forest area in the adjoining Hazaribagh district on Wednesday.

The Naxalites slit the throat of five men, while the woman was bludgeoned to death, he said.

'Pakistan to sign CTBT by mid-Jan'

ISLAMABAD, Dec 24: The military regime in Pakistan has reportedly decided to sign the CTBT by mid-January following extensive behind-the-scenes informal diplomacy with the US but has made it clear that it reserves the right to carry out more nuclear tests if India rejects the treaty, a leading daily here reported yesterday, reports BSS.

The decision to sign the CTBT next month was okayed at a crucial joint meeting of the National Security Council, the highest decision-making body of the military regime in Pakistan and the federal cabinet held on Wednesday, English daily Pakistan Observer said.

In fact, the official announcement after the meeting last evening also gave ample hints that the Gen. Musharraf-led regime had made up its mind over signing the CTBT.

The statement quoted Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar, as saying while briefing the meeting on the CTBT that the treaty does not affect possession or enhancement of nuclear capability or production of fissile material. This, analysts said, was an obvious move to clear the way for signing of the CTBT.

The Foreign Minister also clarified that the treaty would not come into force until signed and ratified by all 44 states that have either nuclear weapons or nuclear reactors, including New Delhi and Islamabad. Thus, if India does not sign, Pakistan would retain the right to conduct tests.

Mahathir's heir apparent calls for leadership elections

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 24: The man designated by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad as his preferred successor has urged the ruling party to hold early leadership elections which would confirm his status, reports AFP.

The sooner the better, although no decision has been made on the date of the elections, Deputy Premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi told Friday's New Straits Times in an interview.

Abdullah was quoted as saying that politicking within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) distracted members "from the real work which needs to be done."

Mahathir said Thursday that UMNO was likely to support Abdullah as his successor, in his strongest public statement of support for his deputy.

Mahathir, 74, has said this will be his last term in office. "UMNO will determine the question of who will succeed me... I think UMNO will back Abdullah as my successor," he told reporters.

The party dominates the National Front coalition which has ruled since independence in 1957.

Party elections will be held next year at a date to be fixed for UMNO president and deputy president, whose corresponding government posts are prime minister and deputy premier.

Mahathir is UMNO president and is certain to be unopposed. The deputy presidency has been vacant since the premier sacked his heir apparent Anwar Ibrahim as deputy premier in September 1998.

The Sun newspaper reported last week that Mahathir wanted to bring forward the party elections from the traditional month of June to reduce "excessive politicking among aspiring candidates and supporters."

It said they would be held after an Islamic festival in March but gave no date.

Six civilians killed in Taliban attack

KABUL, Dec 24: Afghan opposition groups said today Taliban jets attacked Shogara, in the northern province of Balkh, killing six civilians and wounding eight others, reports AFP.

A statement received from the Harak-i-Islami party, one of the factions of the opposition alliance, said the ruling militia's jets carried out four attacks on Thursday afternoon.

Shogara district, which is between the Taliban areas in Balkh and the opposition mountain positions in nearby Samangan province, has been the scene of intense fighting, it said.

According to the statement, opposition soldiers Wednesday captured key positions in this area from the Taliban. The fighting has since subsided, it said.

Russia prepares for final push on Grozny

GROZNY, Russia, Dec 24: Russian soldiers on the outskirts of Grozny made final preparations today to raid the city in force amid reports that a top general has been sacked over allegations of a civilian massacre, reports AFP.

"I am sorry for everyone, the Russians and the Chechens. It will be tough for both," said a federal commander based on the southern edge of Grozny.

"We are trying to save our soldiers, but I am not sure our strategy is very good right now," he added, asking that his name not be used.

The commander oversees Grozny's southern district of Chernorechye that has been the site of bloody street battles over the past six days.

Soldiers on Friday painted each other's backs with special identification signs to avoid so-called friendly fire incidents in the imminent all-out offensive.

Troops were later to be taken to locations to identify where each soldier's push into central Grozny -- fortified by an estimated 2,000 heavily armed Chechen fighter -- will begin. The commander said a date

for the final assault has already been set, but refused to disclose further details. Every building and every quarter of Grozny has already been assigned to a specific group of soldiers, he said.

The Russian interior ministry's crack SOBR and OMON troops would be the first to enter Grozny, but the commander said this was a mistake and defence ministry troops should be placed on the front lines instead.

Russia lost thousands of soldiers during a three-week assault on Grozny at the start of the 1994-96 war.

Seeking to avoid a repeat, federal warplanes and artillery have been shelling the rebel capital for three months in an effort to soften Chechen defences.

That assault, according to Chechen authorities and refugees, has carried a heavy civilian death toll, although the exact number of Chechens killed in Grozny and surrounding villages is impossible to independently confirm.

Besides deaths caused by shelling and artillery fire, reports are now focusing on the mounting indiscipline of fed-

eral troops in Chechnya. This was also a problem in the last war.

Witnesses and human rights officials said several dozen civilians were massacred by drunk federal troops who this month seized the village of Alkhan-Yurt after an extended fight with armed rebels.

Russia has launched an investigation into the well-publicised incident and on Friday Moscow's respected AVN military news agency said General Vladimir Shamanov, head of Russia's western front in Chechnya, has been sacked over the allegations.

A defence ministry spokesman in Moscow angrily dismissed the reports however. Russia's top command is currently on a visit to Belgrade and Defence Minister Igor Sergeev has not yet commented on the story.

AVN cited undisclosed defence sources as saying Shamanov has been replaced by his deputy, identified as General Verbitsky.

Shamanov would retain his rank as commander of the 58th army based in neighboring Dagestan, AVN said.



General Robert Guei addresses journalists yesterday at the national radio headquarters in Abidjan. —AFP photo

Rebel troops take main airport in Abidjan

ABIDJAN, Dec 24: Rebellious Cote d'Ivoire troops today occupied the international airport, bridges and the broadcasting headquarters on the second day of a mutiny in the main city Abidjan, reports AFP.

The troops, reportedly angry over unpaid wages and living standards, blocked traffic between northern and southern parts of the economic capital, cut off the administrative and government district, the presidency, and the airport along the seashore.

The mutiny erupted on Thursday with rampaging soldiers firing shots in the streets and looting. National radio and television stopped broadcasting, with troops occupying the headquarters.

Several countries have warned their nationals to be wary of travelling around Abidjan. The US embassy has told Americans to stay in their homes.

Representatives met several ministers including Defence Minister Bandama N'Gatta on Thursday. N'Gatta said troop delegates would meet President Henri Konan Bedie on Friday morning.

They overran Abidjan's international airport early Friday, chasing out technical staff, a member of the air safety and

navigation agency (ASECNA) told AFP.

Several sources said they were firing in the air and boarding airplanes on the tarmac to amuse themselves.

N'Gatta said four mutineers headed by their leader, named as Staff Sergeant Boka, had talks with him and Prime Minister Daniel Kablan Duncan. They laid down a nine-point list of "essentially material" demands.

The minister said: "We will meet them again on Friday morning, before they meet President Bedie."

Boka was among some 230 Ivorian soldiers who served in the UN mission in the Central African Republic (MINURCA). The soldiers are calling for payment of bonuses they should have received for the mission.

The defence minister said that among the other claims were problems concerning clothing, bedding, application of the military code, and "improvement of living conditions in general."

The mutineers "have no political demands," he said.

During the chaos, two people were reported injured in the Plateau, Abidjan's administrative district, and in Yopougon, a working class neighbourhood.

Hubble's 'brain' replaced

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. Dec 24: Space-walking astronauts installed a new, more powerful computer on the Hubble Space Telescope on Thursday and declared "the brains of Hubble have been replaced," reports Reuters.

Although Thursday's upgrades to the Hubble were significant, the most critical work for the seven astronauts aboard space shuttle Discovery was already behind them.

On Wednesday they replaced a set of broken gyroscopes that had knocked the \$3 billion observatory out of operation in November.

Swiss astronaut Claude Nicollier, making his first space walk, was first through the shuttle's air lock on Thursday.

"Welcome to the EVA fraternity," called out astronaut Steve Smith, using NASA jargon for a space walk, or Extravehicular Activity. The day before Smith and John Grunsfeld had spent more than eight hours in pressurized space suits working all over the four-story Hubble.

"Thank you. It's a pleasure," Nicollier replied.

Nicollier was joined by Michael Foale, the British-born American astronaut making the third space walk of his career.

Once Foale and Nicollier had the new computer in place, Grunsfeld, on Discovery's flight deck, radioed Mission Control: "The brains of Hubble have been replaced."

"Not only does Hubble have a new brain, but it's thinking too," Mission Control radioed back after ground controllers ran preliminary tests.

Hubble's new computer would fall to impress most consumers with its two megabytes of memory and 25 MHz processor. By comparison, most home computers that left the shelves this holiday season had processors in the 400 to 800 MHz range, with 64 to 128 megabytes of memory.

"You have to keep in mind that we don't run windows, we don't have disks, we don't do Internet," John Campbell, project chief for the Hubble, told reporters.

The old computer had a tenth of a megabyte, so this is a major increase in capability.

Designers also had to weigh power consumption against computer muscle. The new computer runs on 30 Watts generated by Hubble's solar panel array.

The Hubble has been secured to a platform in Discovery's cargo bay since Tuesday as shuttle and satellite circle the Earth 370 miles up.

After its launch on Sunday, Discovery chased Hubble for two days before astronauts plucked the observatory from orbit with the shuttle's robot arm.

The astronauts will release the Hubble on Christmas Day.

The Hubble rescue mission has been a top priority for NASA since February, when the telescope was on the brink of failure. Discovery's crew was hastily assembled and the mission patched together in record time.

US alarms over mail bomb threat

WASHINGTON, Dec 24: An international mail bomb threat and newly discovered ties between a US border arrest and an Algerian terrorist group have Americans on high alert in the run-up to the millennium celebration, reports AFP.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a warning Thursday that they had received "unsubstantiated" evidence that small mail bombs from Frankfurt, Germany, might be sent here in the coming days and warned citizens against handling any packages from that city.

Meanwhile, federal prosecutors in Vermont on Thursday said a Canadian woman accused of trying to smuggle an illegal Algerian immigrant into the United States has ties with Algerian extremists.

Lucia Garofalo, 35, was arrested along with Algerian national Bouabide Chamchi, 20, Sunday at a Vermont checkpoint on the border with Canada and charged with immigration violations, including use of a false French passport.

At a detention hearing for the pair Thursday, court documents indicated that Garofalo's car and cellphone were traced to Brahim Mahdi, a member of the Algerian Islamic League, which has been linked to terrorist activities in Europe and Algeria.

Garofalo will be detained until her alleged ties to Mahdi can be investigated. A December 30 hearing will decide whether she can be released or must be held until trial. Chamchi was ordered held without bail because of his flight risk.

The ongoing probe now extends to Garofalo's Algerian husband, who was deported from Canada in 1993 after he tried to cross the US border with a fake French passport. He was also arrested in London with a falsified Greek passport. US Attorney Charles Tetzlaff said in Burlington, Vermont Thursday.

Authorities stressed there was so far no evidence linking the arrest on the Canadian-Vermont border and that of a suspected Algerian terrorist last week for trying to smuggle

explosives into the United States.

Algerian national Ahmed Ressaym, 32, was apprehended December 14 for trying to bring bomb ingredients, timing devices and other components into the United States in his rental car on board a ferry from Victoria, British Columbia.

US and Canadian authorities are on a manhunt for possible accomplices to Ressaym and are investigating his possible ties to America's most wanted terrorist, Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden.

The developments heightened fears around the United States, where borders and airports were on high alert and aviation officials said travellers should expect long lines and delays over the holidays as their bags get an extra going over.

US President Bill Clinton issued a blanket warning to Americans for the holidays.

"We know that at the millennium a lot of people who may even be a little crazy by our standards may have a political point to make may try to take

advantage of it," he said in a CNN interview to be broadcast later Thursday.

The president also urged citizens to report anything suspicious to authorities, but added the government was on "a heightened state of alert" and said people should be assured of US security and enjoy the holidays.

Clinton, himself, is sticking with plans for a spectacular gala at Washington's monument-studded Mall on December 31, but many Americans were cancelling travel and celebration plans amid the growing alarm over a terrorist strike.

Police patrols with bomb-sniffing dogs were deployed Thursday at New York's Lincoln Tunnel after the arrest of a man who used the Internet to threaten to blow up a New York tunnel.

During a chat room session on America Online, the man, Renato DeSouza Flor, warned an explosive-packed blue truck would be left in either the Lincoln or Holland Tunnel, both of which link New Jersey to Manhattan.



Filipinos crowd outside the century old Roman Catholic church in suburban Las Pinas yesterday during the traditional dawn mass observed all over the country as the celebration begins for the Christmas season. Churches hold nine days of dawn mass as a way of devotion and celebration marking the birth of Jesus Christ culminating in the "Misa de Gallo," the grand Christmas eve mass. —AFP photo

Fun-loving Goa bans giant rave party

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: The Indian state of Goa has banned a 10-day-long rave party and outlawed drugs and nudity during festivities for the millennium, the state's chief minister said today, reports AFP.

Francisco Sardinha told AFP by telephone from the state capital Panaji that the provincial administration would allow only "good, clean fun" between Christmas Eve and the New Year.

Goa, a western coastal state that has a haven for hippies and backpackers in the sixties and seventies, is one of the few places in India where hordes of tourists, foreigners as well as Indians, are expected to celebrate the millennium.

Sardinha said he had banned a rave party organised by the son of one of India's oldest and blue-blooded industrial families because the organiser "had not taken permission and had erected illegal structures at the venue."

Jeh Wadia, heir to India's Bombay Dyeing textiles empire who counts among his ancestors Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, had planned the "world's biggest rave party" at Goa's Anjuna Beach.

Wadia expected about 25,000 people a day at the party, which was originally scheduled to start from midnight December 22.

The mega-party ran into trouble after local newspapers accused Wadia of illegally occupying more than 77,000 square metres (828,520 square feet) of beaches and dunes for the bash and erecting marquees and other "illegal constructions" without permission.

Sardinha, 53, who became chief minister in November, also stressed that drugs and nudity would be taboo in the former Portuguese colony.

"Acid parties are out. Even when I was a young man, I did not go to such things. One can have fun without drugs," he said.

The chief minister, however, admitted that a total ban on drugs in Goa would be difficult to enforce.

Bofors scam HC rejects plea for deletion of Rajiv's name in charge-sheet

NEW DELHI, Dec 24: The Delhi High Court yesterday dismissed a petition seeking deletion of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's name in the Rs 64 crore Bofors gun deal kickback case charge-sheet, reports PTI.

Justice Cyril Joseph said CBI has not committed any illegality by including Rajiv's name in the second column of CBI charge-sheet meaning person not sent for trial.

Hong Kong govt suffers setback Judge rules immigration law unconstitutional

HONG KONG, Dec 24: The government suffered a setback in its drawn-out battle with mainland migrants Friday when a judge ruled that all Hong Kong-born people enjoy constitutional residency rights — even those born here to mainland Chinese parents, radio reported, says AP.

The latest challenge against the government involved a 2-year-old boy born in Hong Kong to Chinese parents who have no residency rights.

The government said the boy could not stay under local immigration laws that give the right of abode to anyone born

here — except for the children of mainland parents, Radio Hong Kong reported.

The exclusion was put in place to discourage pregnant Chinese women from coming across the border just to give birth, but Judge Frank Stock in Hong Kong's Court of First Instance found it to be unconstitutional, the radio report said.

Court officials were not immediately available to confirm the ruling when The Associated Press ran the judiciary's press office early Friday afternoon.

Stock said the territory's mini-constitution, known as the Basic Law, confers residency rights to all Hong Kong-

born people, regardless of their parents' nationality, radio reported.

The question of mainlanders' residency rights has confronted the Hong Kong government since the former British colony was returned to Chinese rule in July 1997.

Hong Kong has become a highly autonomous "Special Administrative Region" of China after the handover, and border control remains in place. Hundreds of thousands of mainlanders seeking better fortunes have come to free and affluent Hong Kong legally or illegally in the past few decades.

Banned opposition party in China calls for democracy

BEIJING, Dec 24: After a year in which most of its leaders have been imprisoned, a banned opposition party broke a long silence with a bold demand Friday for an end to Communist Party rule and the beginning of democracy in China, reports AP.

The China Democracy Party rejected key Chinese communist doctrines — the Communist Party's constitutional right to hold supreme power, the right to unite Taiwan with the mainland by force and the insistence that national sovereignty must

not be compromised, even to end abuses of rights.

"Simply put, human rights comes before sovereignty," said the party declaration, a copy of which was faxed to The Associated Press.

An English summary of the 20,000-character statement called on the communist government to "terminate its one-party rule within a reasonable time frame."

It did not call for the government's overthrow but argued that the people have the right to abolish it "when their human

rights are systematically and persistently violated."

He Depu, a China Democracy Party member in Beijing, said the government had no immediate response but added that the declaration could bring on more repression.

"But believe this work must be done. What we have written has been carefully considered and we believe it contains no errors," he said.

Eighteen leading members have been sentenced to prison on subversion charges, some for up to 13 years.

Fighting leaves 91 dead in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Dec 24: Ending a brief lull, Tamil Tiger rebels fired heavy artillery at military positions near the strategic causeway to the Jaffna Peninsula, and at least 91 guerrillas and soldiers were killed, and army officials said, reports AP.

The fighting began late Thursday at Iyakachchi, south of Elephant Pass, a northern causeway that is the gateway to the former rebel stronghold, Jaffna, about 280 kilometres (170 metres) north of capital Colombo.

At least 80 rebels died in the latest fighting, while military casualties were 11 killed and 72 wounded, mostly from shell fire, said the official speaking on the customary condition of anonymity.

Military claims of high rebel casualties are impossible to verify because movement by independent observers in the battle zone is restricted.

The fighting ended a pause during the presidential elections Tuesday, won by Chandrika Kumaratunga who was installed Wednesday for a second term.

Earlier this week, the Tigers said they overran the southern section of the Elephant Pass camp during the weekend. The military denied the claim.

Military spokesman Brig. Sunil Tennakoon said rebel radio broadcasts and reports from troops indicated that at least 1,000 rebels have been killed or wounded in the fighting for the causeway that began Dec 11. He said 87 soldiers were killed and 870 wounded.

Bosnian Serb war crimes suspect arrested

BANJA LUKA, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Dec 24: NATO peacekeepers arrested Bosnian Serb war crimes suspect Zoran Vukovic on Thursday in Foca, southeast Bosnia, an interior ministry official said today, reports AFP.

Vukovic, 44, also known as "Mikser", was detained around 10:25 p.m. (0325 BST) while he was walking on a street in Foca, said the official.

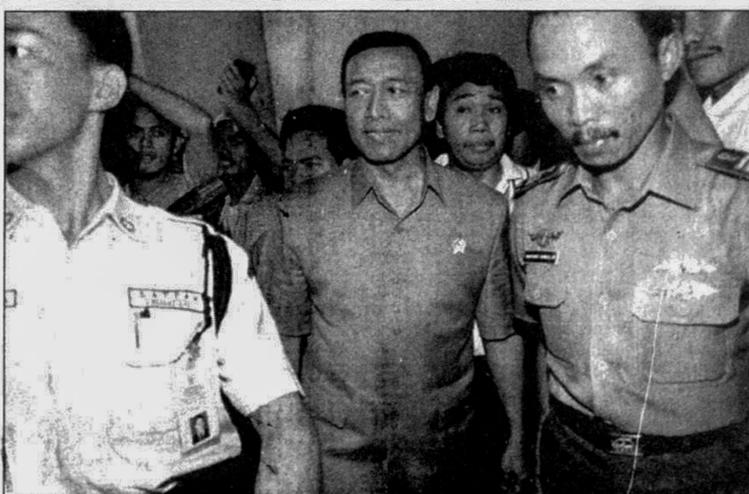
He was taken unharmed to a nearby SFOR base.

Vukovic was the deputy commander of Bosnian Serb military police and needed paramilitary forces in Foca between April 1992 and February 1993, Robertson said in a statement.

In Brussels, NATO Secretary General George Robertson confirmed that a man believed to be Vukovic was in SFOR's custody.

The arrest follows the high-profile capture of Bosnian Serb general Stanislav Galic on Monday in the northwest town of Banja Luka.

Galic, wanted under a secret indictment, commanded Bosnian Serb forces who laid siege to Sarajevo during the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia.



Former Indonesian military chief General Wiranto (C) is escorted through the crowd of journalist after appearing before the National Commission of Human Rights in Jakarta yesterday. The commission are investigating human rights abuses in East Timor but the Indonesian team probing the violence criticised pro-Jakarta armed militia groups for being uncooperative and refusing to appear for questioning. —AFP photo

BRIEFLY

675 beggars held in Jeddah: Saudi police have arrested 675 beggars, mostly foreigners, in the western city of Jeddah over the last two days, the Al-Jazira newspaper said yesterday, AFP reports from Riyadh.

Of those arrested only 20 are Saudi nationals, with most of the rest illegal immigrants who arrived in the kingdom as pilgrims and stayed on when their visas expired, it said.

1000 homeless in Vietnam: More than 1000 people have been left homeless in the southern Vietnamese coastal province of Kien Giang after the coast was lashed by high monsoon waves, an official said yesterday, AFP reports from Hanoi.

Officials said 131 homes were destroyed and 107 damaged on Thursday morning when huge waves swept Kien Hai island district off the coast of Kien Giang. No one was injured because the residents had been evacuated in advance. Officials estimate damage worth only about 70,000 dollars as most houses were small and made of natural materials.

2 die as chopper crashes in Russia: An Mi 8 helicopter crashed in central Siberia, killing two crew members and injuring the third, a news report said Friday, AP reports from Moscow.

The helicopter, rented by the Uvat Service Company, had been used to service oil wells in the Tyumen region, located 1,800 kilometres (1,100 miles) east of Moscow. Radio contact was lost with the helicopter on Thursday morning and Tyumen residents discovered the wreckage two hours later along the bank of the Irtysh River, the Interfax news agency said.