

2,000 rebels holed up in Grozny

## Troops continue to advance

GRÖZNY, Russia, Dec 26: Several thousand well-armed Russian forces poured into Grozny today, but advanced cautiously, pulling back as soon as they came under fire from an estimated 2,000 rebels holed up in the besieged city, reports AFP.

The Russians are retreating every time they get into a fight, an AFP correspondent on the front line reported. They are not storming it like they did during the futile 1994-96 war.

The federal troops made their best progress on the southern and eastern fronts of Grozny, according to soldiers. There were clearly Russian casualties, although people in charge refused to give any figures.

The AFP correspondent said that perhaps 2,000 of the estimated 100,000 Russian forces encircling Grozny had so far entered the rebel capital.

Only soldiers streaked into Grozny, with tanks and armoured personnel carriers waiting on the outside of what federal forces estimate is a city mined at every corner.

On Saturday, the first day of the Grozny attack, one Chechen leader claimed that 300 Russian

soldiers were gunned down by separatists in the attack.

Moscow denies that figure, which is impossible to verify as walking around Grozny is unsafe. Meanwhile Russian ministers estimate that 45,000 to 50,000 civilians remain in basements of the shelled-out city.

The push into Grozny comes at the end of an arduous Moscow debate about the merits and costs of the assault, one which has made Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's government popular but vulnerable to damage should it falter.

Putin soared to popularity after Russia first launched an air assault on the separatist republic on September 5.

The tanks went in on October 1, an assault that has met little resistance from retreating Chechens until Russian forces made it to the outskirts of Grozny.

Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov earlier this week issued an order for his troops -- besides those encircled in the capital -- to retreat into the southern mountains.

These served as an impenetrable base for Chechen fighters in the last war. They mounted

fierce counter-attacks that eventually brought Moscow to sue for peace and offer Chechnya de facto independence.

Russia's NTV private television, reporting from the main Russian North Caucasus military base in Mordovsk, said that the operation to take Grozny was going "very slowly."

### Russians-Chechens meet to discuss civilians' fate

Meanwhile, the Russian emergency minister and a spokesman for Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov met Saturday in Chechnya's neighbour Ingushetia to discuss the fate of Chechen civilians caught in the Russian offensive on Grozny, Itar-TASS news agency reported.

Russian minister Sergei Shoygu and Khodzakhmed Yarikhonov of Chechnya met in the town of Magas to discuss ways of evacuating some civilians from the Chechen capital. The remaining civilians are estimated at somewhere between 15,000 and 50,000.

A second meeting was expected within the next few days.

## Hotel fire claims 20 in China

BEIJING, Dec 26: Twenty people were killed and 31 others injured today in a fire that broke out in the basement of a hotel in northeastern China, the official Xinhua news agency reported, says AFP.

The cause of the fire, which broke out at 4 a.m. (2:00 am BST Saturday) at the Hawaii Grand Hotel in Changchun, capital of Jilin province, has yet to be determined, Xinhua said.

The victims, about half of them women, were choked to death by the smoke while they were in a communal bath in the basement, Xinhua said, adding that firemen "encountered great difficulties during their rescue operation since electric power was cut off."

A hundred-and-fifty other hotel guests, including seven from Japan, were evacuated. The hotel sustained undamaged Sunday, but for the basement area, Xinhua said.

Local officials said an inquiry was under way and those responsible would be brought to justice.

The manager of the bath was celebrating Christmas with his employees when the fire broke out, Xinhua said.

## Taliban reluctant to get involved in resolving plane hijack: Analysts

KABUL, Dec 26: Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia will be reluctant to get involved in resolving the hijack of an Indian aircraft parked at Kandahar airport for fear of sparking further criticism from the West, analysts said today, reports AFP.

"They are in a horrible position. They are accused of supporting Muslim militancy and here they have militants at their doorstep," said one western analyst.

UN officials flew into Kandahar today to help end the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814, seized by five armed Muslim militants on Christmas Eve.

The hijackers, who are holding 160 passengers and crew, have demanded the release of an Islamic cleric being held in the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir.

When they landed in Afghanistan the hijackers were likely expecting a warm welcome from fellow Muslims, the analyst said.

But Taliban, the fundamentalist Islamic militia that controls most of Afghanistan, has condemned the hijackers as terrorists and called in the

United Nations to help.

"We are in favour of a solution which suits the passengers. We have been trying and waiting for a United Nations delegation to come," said Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil.

He said the hijackers asked for a guarantee of asylum in Afghanistan, which the Taliban refused.

"In order that no allegation is levelled against us because of this guarantee, we prefer that the entire talks be held through the UN," Mutawakil said.

The Taliban are already under intense international pressure. Last month the United Nations imposed financial and aviation sanctions on the regime for refusing to hand over indicted terrorist Osama bin Laden.

Bin Laden, who is living in Afghanistan, is wanted by a US court for the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania last year in which 224 people died.

"The Taliban are very cautiously handling this sensitive issue to save their global image already tarnished due to harbouring the anti-US Saudi dis-

sident Osama bin Laden," another analyst said.

"The Taliban have been painted into a horrible corner," he said. "They will pray that the plane just disappears from Afghanistan and goes wherever it can."

There is little chance the Taliban will make a rescue attempt, said Hamid Gul, a retired general and former head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency.

"The Taliban are not trained in handling such a case and there are not many facilities at Kandahar," said Gul in Islamabad.

It would be very dangerous to risk the lives of so many people.

Gul blamed US foreign policy for sparking frustration among Muslim groups across the world.

"These Muslim groups used to be the darling of the West," he said, referring to West's support for the Mujahideen movement against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

"Now these groups have got frustrated at the behaviour of the West. It is a very dangerous situation. Everybody wants to have their place in the sun."

## Surgery on Chandrika ruled out

COLOMBO, Dec 26: Medical experts in Britain have ruled out surgery on Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga who is in London seeking treatment for shrapnel injuries, the government said today, reports AFP.

The injury to Kumaratunga's right eye is receiving "further attention and will be under constant review," the government said in a statement issued here after she left for London on Wednesday.

Kumaratunga narrowly escaped assassination when a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber detonated explosives at her final election campaign meeting here on December 18.

The medical team of experts from Sri Lanka accompanying the President, in collaboration with the team of medical experts from London, has concluded she has made a remarkable recovery, "the statement said."

"They have recommended that she should resume normal duties forthwith."

The statement did not say when the President was due to return home.

## Army truck plunge kills 15 Indian soldiers

NEW DELHI, Dec 26: Fifteen Indian soldiers were killed and 20 more injured today when their truck plunged into a steep gorge in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said, reports AFP.

The bus was carrying the troops from the Garhwal Rifles regiment to a special function when the accident occurred near the town of Gumkhal.

Senior army and district officials went to the scene to supervise rescue work, PTI said.

## Trial of Falungong sect leaders opens in China

BEIJING, Dec 26: The trial of four leaders of the outlawed Falungong religious sect accused of "revealing state secrets" opened in Beijing today, a group spokeswoman said from New York.

The trial opened today at 8:00 a.m. (6:00 am BST), spokeswoman Gail Rachlin told AFP.

The Xinhua news agency is due to announce the verdict on Monday at the end of the day, she added.

The trial of Li Chang, Wang Zhiwen, Yao Jie and Ji Liwu was originally scheduled to open on December 1, but Rachlin earlier told AFP that putting off the hearing until the day after Christmas seemed to be a ploy by the Chinese authorities to try to avoid international attention.

## Torrential rain lashes France

PARIS, Dec 26: Gale force winds and torrential rain lashed the northwestern France early today, wreaking havoc in Paris and surrounding areas, reports AFP.

Winds gusting up to 170 km an hour were recorded in the Normandy region, and up to 100 km an hour in the capital.

Orly and Charles de Gaulle international airports outside Paris were closed, with arrivals being diverted to Brussels and regional airports in France. Local rail, metro and bus services were cancelled, and hundreds of trees were brought down in the grounds surrounding the Palace of Versailles, just outside Paris.

## 6 Protestant leaders sent to Chinese labour camp

HONG KONG, Dec 26: Six leaders of underground Protestant churches have been sentenced without trial to hard labour in a camp in China, a Hong Kong-based rights group said today, reports AFP.

"Well known religious leader" David Zhang was sentenced to three years hard labour last week for "using religion to undermine the law," said the Information Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China.

Nanyang police in central Henan province also sentenced Wang Jianzhong and Shen Yiping to two years and Feng Jingguo and Jing Rongli to one year. The sixth leader Zheng Shuqian was sentenced to an indefinite term, the statement added. They were immediately dispatched to the nearby Ruyang Labour Camp.

## Tehran closes schools as choking smog returns

TEHRAN, Dec 26: Iran today ordered kindergartens and primary schools closed here after a choking cloud of pollution again descended on the capital, reports AFP.

Authorities on state radio said the schools were to be closed in both Tehran and Rey, just further south, as the Tehran metropolitan area continues to be besieged by heavy pollution.

The toxic cloud lifted for a while on Saturday but was back again Sunday morning, finally prompting authorities to ban motorcycles in the capital and to limit other vehicles traffic. To limit air pollution at the foot of a mountain range which limits the free circulation of air, is considered one of the most polluted cities in the world, along with Mexico City, Bangkok and Jakarta.

## Rejuvenated Hubble released into orbit

HOUSTON, Texas, Dec 26: The US space agency NASA gave the world scientific community a much appreciated Christmas present Saturday, as the Shuttle Discovery released into orbit the newly repaired Hubble telescope, reports AFP.

At 5:03 p.m. (5:03 am BST), French astronaut Jean-Francois Clervoy used the shuttle's mechanical arm to gently lift the 12-tonne telescope from Discovery's cargo bay and send it on its way into space.

As the mechanical arm loosened its grip on the rejuvenated Hubble, it slowly floated away, its protective foil glittering in rays of sunshine.

"Congratulations for an excellent deploy," exclaimed flight controller Steve Robinson. "Thanks for the great Christmas present."

The 10-year-old Hubble, which allows scientists to peer deep into space, had received six new gyroscopes, a new on-board computer and other parts during three space walks undertaken by the shuttle crew.

According to NASA, the three space walks lasted a combined total of 24 hours and 33 minutes.

In addition to the gyroscope

and the new computer, the Hubble received six voltage-temperature improvement kits and a refurbished fine guidance sensor.

New thermal protective covers will allow the Hubble to better cope with temperature fluctuations since one side of the telescope faces the Sun continually, cooling when it goes behind the Earth from a steamy 80 degrees Celsius (175 degrees Fahrenheit) to a frigid minus 54 (minus 65 Fahrenheit), a range of more than 130 degrees.

These fluctuations occur 16 times a day -- the Hubble completes its path around Earth once every 97 minutes. Both its outer protection and the radiators inside function to keep the temperature inside the telescope relatively steady.

"Functional checks and tests of the hardware indicate that the new equipment is working properly and will further enhance the Hubble's scientific capabilities," mission control said in a statement Saturday.

The telescope hurtling through space at 27,000 km per hour allows scientists back on Earth to focus on a single object in space long enough to take spectacular photographs.



Passengers of the hijacked Indian Airlines plane arrived at New Delhi airport Saturday following their release in Dubai. An Indian Airlines relief plane brought 27 freed passengers back to India.

## Chandrika to call snap parliamentary polls

COLOMBO, Dec 26: Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga is set to call a snap parliamentary election after her win in a presidential poll last week, political analysts said today, reports AFP.

The presidential election was held 10 months ahead of schedule and a general election hot on the heels of her victory could give the ruling party a psychological boost, analysts said.

The term of the present parliament ends in August but Kumaratunga has powers to dissolve the 225-member legislative assembly and call an early election, as she hinted before her election Tuesday.

Kumaratunga won 51 percent of the vote, down from the record 62 percent she won in 1994.

Analysts say the government could call snap polls to arrest

the declining electoral fortunes of the ruling People's Alliance.

The ruling party, in theory, has only a one-seat majority in the 225-member assembly and lacks the mandatory two-thirds majority to make promised sweeping constitutional reforms.

However, senior minister Mangala Samaraweera said two weeks before Kumaratunga's re-election that she was seeking a mandate to scrap the country's constitution and end war.

Samaraweera said Kumaratunga will also adopt a new electoral system through the present parliament or through a constituent assembly.

In 1995 she unveiled a radical peace plan aimed at turning the country into a de facto federal state but the main opposition and the Tamil rebels rejected it.

## 12 die as building collapses in Egypt

ALEXANDRIA, Egypt, Dec 26: Twelve people were killed, including three children, when an apartment building in this northern Egyptian city collapsed, police sources told AFP today.

The police said three others were wounded after the four-storey building collapsed Saturday, apparently because a broken water main had wrecked the foundation of the building.

Residents of the area said municipal officials had not reacted to the broken main after being alerted about the situation earlier in the week.

They said they had made a second call earlier Saturday, hours before the deadly collapse.

## Iraqi press slams Russia, France

BAGHDAD, Dec 26: An Iraqi newspaper today slammed Russia and France, without naming them, for advising Baghdad to cooperate with the United Nations on a new resolution covering sanctions and arms inspections, reports AFP.

An editorial in the ruling Baath Party's Ath-Thawra newspaper said "those who think the resolution is a step forward or better than nothing, they were either wrong or ill-intentioned or incapable of saying the truth."

Russia, which abstained from the Security Council vote, described the resolution as a step in the right direction, while France, which also abstained, urged Baghdad to accept and implement the resolution.

China was the other permanent council member that abstained from the vote, which was backed by Britain and the United States.

## Ferry sets sail from Bahrain for Iraq

DUBAI, Dec 26: An Emirati passenger and car ferry was to set sail from Bahrain for a southern Iraqi port today in the first such service since crippling UN sanctions were imposed on Baghdad more than nine years ago, reports AFP.

A spokesman for Naif Marine Services in Dubai, the trading hub of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), said the ship would leave Bahrain's Port Salman at about 3:00 pm BST, arriving some 16 hours later in Um Qasr.

The Jebel Ali-1 will be carrying as many as 200 passengers, mostly from the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, but "bookings were still being taken this morning (Sunday)," the spokesman said.

The passengers consist mostly of Muslim pilgrims visiting holy sites in Iraq and Gulf businessmen bidding for new

contracts under the oil-for-food programme, which allows Iraq to sell oil in return for humanitarian aid.

A return fare costs between 110 and 320 dollars, and cars can be taken on board for an extra fee. With a baggage allowance of 100 kgs (220 pounds) it is hoped the service will boost trade between Bahrain and Iraq.

The spokesman said celebrations were being planned in Um Qasr and in the southern port city of Basra and the ship would not make the return journey to Bahrain until Tuesday.

The service will run once a week with most visas being issued on arrival in Iraq.

Bahrain has maintained ties with Iraq, despite the 1990 invasion of Kuwait which damaged Baghdad's relations with most Gulf Arab monarchies.

## 'Israel may withdraw from Lebanon in April'

JERUSALEM, Dec 26: Prime Minister Ehud Barak could withdraw Israeli troops from south Lebanon by as early as April if there is progress in the next round of peace talks with Syria, a newspaper reported today, says AFP.

The Yediot Aharanot newspaper quoted political sources in Jerusalem as saying that "significant progress" in next week's negotiations could facilitate a withdrawal earlier than the planned July target date.

"Even if a full agreement is not reached, it is possible that the atmosphere in the negotiations will allow for an earlier than planned pullback," the paper quoted a source as saying.

Officials from Barak's office had no immediate comment on the report.

Barak on Friday approved a plan for the withdrawal code-named "New Horizon" and appointed his team to prepare for any resumption of negotiations with Lebanon, which broke off in 1994.

Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara said last week he expected Lebanon to take part in the talks following the second round of negotiations set to resume in West Virginia on January 3.

But Shara has insisted that Syria and Lebanon will never sign separate peace deals with Israel.

## Coup in Ivory Coast Security forces, politicians pledge allegiance to junta

ABIDJAN, Dec 26: The commanders of all units of Cote d'Ivoire's army, police and gendarmerie went on television Saturday night to pledge allegiance to the junta set up following the overthrow of president Henri Konan Bedie on Friday, reports AFP.

Laurent Dona Fologo, the secretary general of Bedie's Cote d'Ivoire Democratic Party, also pledged allegiance to the junta, as did ousted foreign minister Essy Amara.

The officers commanding paratroopers, marines, infantry, armoured units and others took an oath to obey the

National Salvation Committee set up by General Robert Guie, a former defence chief.

Fologo, who had also been minister of national solidarity, appealed for unity and said he hoped that the changes "in the interests of the population" would succeed.

Gendarmerie units, which were reported to have clashed earlier in the day with the junta's forces, and which had been considered the security unit the most loyal to Bedie, were deployed in Abidjan to help police put a stop to looting, reliable sources said.

## Taiwan plans to scale back 'political warfare' force

TAIPEI, Dec 26: Taiwan's military plans to downsize its decade-old "political warfare" force as part of sweeping reforms, it was reported today, says AFP.

The structure of Taiwan's "political warfare" units would remain unchanged under a military reform bill, which is awaiting the parliament's deliberation, the Chinese-language China Times said.

The adjustment of structure and status for the existing political warfare units had been slated for the second stage of the reform, the paper said.

Calls are on the rise for the removal of the units, which have been largely in charge of the Nationalist army's ideology controls in their struggles against Chinese communist forces in the wake of the island's democratisation.

But the paper said Defence Minister Tang Fei had told parliament last week that reform involving political warfare units may be ahead of schedule.

It said the general warfare department, which has been placed under the direct jurisdiction of the general staff headquarters for nearly five decades, may be reorganised as "the office of deputy chief of the general staff for political warfare."

The head of the office would be downgraded from a general to a lieutenant general.

The defence ministry in the meantime may set up a "general political warfare bureau."

"Political warfare units are still needed as they faced pretty well in preventing the infiltration of the enemy and enhancing the military combat capability," defence ministry said.

## Tamils lose king-maker status

COLOMBO, Dec 26: Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's re-election after narrowly escaping assassination has shattered the king-maker status previously enjoyed by the country's minority Tamils, reports AFP.

Political analysts note Sri Lanka's Tamil community have lost the balance of power they enjoyed when they gave block support to Kumaratunga, head of one of the two main majority Sinhalese community groups.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga managed to cobble together a fragile one-seat majority coalition administration in August 1994 thanks to the support of Tamil legislator P. Chandrasekaran.

But the MP defected just before the election and another key Tamil ally, S. Thondaman, died in the initial stages of the election campaign.

Nevertheless when the elec-

tion results were announced Wednesday, Kumaratunga's hold on power was unaffected.

Until the December 18 suicide bombing blamed on the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Sinhalese appeared to favour negotiations as advocated by the opposition's Ranil Wickremesinghe.

"The bomb changed the entire picture overnight," said an Asian diplomat who had predicted a swing in favour of Wickremesinghe during his campaign. "Suddenly we see a great polarisation in society."

"From the politics of the minority, we are now seeing a shift to the politics of the majority."

When Kumaratunga called the snap election in October, some 10 months ahead of schedule, the Tamil community went into a spin, unable to agree a common candidate to challenge Kumaratunga.

The man who helped Ku-

maratunga form the government in 1994, P. Chandrasekaran, boasted he would ensure Wickremesinghe's election. He was to be proved wrong.

Former Tamil chief minister A. Varadarajah Perumal commented: "The Tamil vote is also getting divided... that is a good thing for the Tamils because they cannot be accused of making or breaking a government."

The Tamils, who constitute 18 percent of the population, previously retained influence as the 70 percent Sinhalese community was divided between Kumaratunga's People's Alliance and the opposition UNP.

The ultra nationalist MEP, or People's United Front, which just a few weeks before the election began supporting Kumaratunga, is already crowing about a "Sinhala majority vote to defeat Tamil ambitions."



A rescuer hoisted an oil-covered Guillemot bird in his hands after he picked it up on the Donnant beach in Belle Ile en Mer, western France Saturday as a result of the oil slick triggered by the sinking of the Maltese tanker Erika, two weeks ago. Strong winds threatened yesterday to drive more oil onto the coast in the regions of Brittany and Vendee.