

2,000 rebels holed up in Grozny

Troops continue to advance

GROZNY, 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

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 impene- trable 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 Mozdok, said that the operation to take Grozny was going "very slowly."

Russians-Chechens meet to discuss civilians' fate

Meanwhile, the Russian emergencies 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 Khodzhakhmed Yarikhov 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 ex- pected 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. 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 seemed 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, 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 Mutawakel.

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

"The order that no allegation is levelled against us because of this guarantee, we prefer that the entire talks be held through the UN," Mutawakel 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 dissident Osama bin Laden," another analyst said.

"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 could 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 gully 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 Gumiuk.

Senior army and district officials went to the scene of the accident 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.

The trial of Li Chang, Wang Zhiwei, Yao Jie and Ji Liewu 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 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 Jiasheng and Shen Yiping to two years and Feng Jianguo and Jing Rongqi to one year.

The sixth leader Zheng Shiquan 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 in 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 vehicular traffic.

Tehran, located 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.



The US Space Shuttle Discovery's crew wear Santa Claus hats during an on-orbit media interview Saturday from the shuttle's aft flight deck following their overhaul and release of the Hubble space telescope. From top-left are: Steve Smith and John Grunsfeld of US and Claude Nicollier of Switzerland. From bottom-left are: Michael Foale of US and Jean-Francois Clervoy of France.

—AFP photo

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 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 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.

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.

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

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

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

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

The spokesman said celebrations were being planned in Umm 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.

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 Farouq 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.

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



A rescuer holds 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. —AFP photo



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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.

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 reorganized 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 fared pretty well in preventing the infiltration of the enemy and enhancing the military combat capability," the 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-