

Hostages unlikely to be freed soon : Analyst

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: The hijackers of an Indian Airlines plane are not likely to free the hostages soon, a defence expert said today, adding New Delhi had badly botched the handling of the crisis, reports AFP.

K. Subrahmanyam, a noted defence analyst and commentator who was part of a hijack management team in 1984 when a plane was held for 36 hours, told Star television channel the drama was not likely to end soon.

"It's very difficult to say but earlier hijackings have gone on for as long as 17 days," he said.

Subrahmanyam said negotiations to free the hostages would take time.

"It will take few rounds (of talks) at least," he said.

Indian negotiators held their first direct talks Monday with Muslim militant hijackers holding 160 hostages aboard the airliner in the southern Afghanistan town of Kandahar.

The hijackers, who took over the plane on Christmas Eve, explained their demands during

the talks, held through the control tower of Kandahar airport.

The hijackers have demanded the release of Maulana Masood Azhar, a Pakistani Islamic cleric arrested in India-administered Kashmir in 1994.

Subrahmanyam said the Indian government had mismanaged the hostage crisis, especially the public relations side.

"The government has not handled it efficiently... it should have been reassuring the families of those on board," he said.

"It should have been reassuring the people rather than fuelling the anxieties of the people."

He said mounting public anger against what is being perceived as government apathy was based on the assumption the hostages would meet a bloody end.

"The people in India should understand one thing -- the possibility of hostages coming to harm is not likely. In very few cases the hijackers harm the hostages physically... (as)

they are an instrument to get something else."

When asked if Indian authorities had erred in letting the hijacked plane to take off from the northern Indian city of Amritsar -- where it was forced to land before going on to Lahore in Pakistan, Dubai and finally Afghanistan -- he was evasive.

"I don't have the full facts," he said, but added, "If we are lax and sloppy for 365 days, we are not going to get efficient in one day."

He said Indian authorities had to constantly be on their guard against such incidents.

"We are living next to a terrorist state," he said, referring to India's arch-rival Pakistan. "We must understand that Pakistan is there to hit us."

India says four of the hijackers are Pakistanis, and has identified them as Ahmed Sheikh, S.A. Qazi, Ibrahim Mistry and Syed Akhtar Syed.

Mistry is believed to be the brother of the Pakistani cleric whose release is being sought.



An airport security official belonging to religious Taliban militia provides water bottles to the hijackers for passengers inside the Indian hijacked plane at Kandahar Airport yesterday.

— AFP photo

Russians gain upper hand in Grozny

MOSCOW, Dec 28: Russian troops have gained the upper hand in the Chechen capital Grozny and were advancing towards the city's centre as rebel defenders ran out of ammunition, Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeev was quoted as saying today by Interfax, reports AFP.

Three days after launching their long-awaited assault on the rebel capital, Sergeev said the Russian forces, aided by pro-Russian Chechen units commanded by former Grozny mayor Bislan Gantamirov, "had turned the situation back to their advantage."

Chechen separatist fighters in the city had been putting up still resistance to the federal assault were now running out of ammunition, Sergeev said.

The defence minister did not specify which districts of Grozny had fallen to Russian troops but said the soldiers, who "were meeting with fierce resistance," were continuing to advance towards the city's center from all sides.

"The operation is moving

ahead according to plan, without haste," said Sergeev. "The main thing is to limit losses among our men as much as we can and to avoid deaths among the civilian population."

Moscow says some 2,000 Chechen fighters are still holed up inside Grozny, where federal troops launched a major offensive to take the city on Saturday. Tens of thousands of civilians are also believed trapped in the city.

Earlier Tuesday, Gantamirov said his men had seized Staropromyslovskaya, a western district of Grozny.

Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov on Monday urged Chechen fighters to defend their besieged capital "to the end."

Chechens to be wiped out unless they surrender

PARIS, Dec 28: The Chechen rebels will be wiped out unless they surrender, General Valery Manilov, number two in the Russian army command, warned in a French newspaper today, reports AFP.

"We're not giving the organized groups the options of fleeing. If they don't capitulate they will be annihilated," the general said in the Liberation daily.

Only small groups of "one or two people" will be allowed to escape the Russian federal forces and escape into the countryside, he added.

"Whatever they say, they have suffered serious losses and their line of command and their troops have been destroyed... their forces are weakened and they are in the process of being defeated," the general said.

In order to dislodge the "bandits," the Russian forces are counting on the help of local residents who are enlisting into pro-Russian militias, he added.

Manilov said that since hostilities began in the rebel province in August, the Russian troops had lost 465 men with a further 1,310 injured.

These figures did not include the death toll of interior ministry forces which is "not high," he was quoted as saying.

Handling of plane hijack Vajpayee risks a damaging political fallout

NEW DELHI, Dec 28: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee risks a damaging political fallout from the Indian Airlines hijacking, amid mounting criticism of the government's handling of the crisis, reports AFP.

As the drama entered its fifth day Tuesday, experts said Vajpayee's administration was increasingly seen to be confused about the issue -- the biggest crisis this year since a two-month conflict with Pakistan in Kashmir.

Political commentator Mahesh Rangarajan said the Hindu nationalist premier, who made national security a key electoral plank before the September-October national elections, had failed to deliver on that count.

"He faces the devil's alternative," Rangarajan told AFP. "If the hijackers' demands are met

with, he will be seen to be weak. If it ends in tragedy, it spells disaster."

Rangarajan said Vajpayee had erred in strongly ruling out a compromise with the Muslim militant hijackers who commandeered an Indian Airlines plane from Kathmandu to the Indian city of Amritsar, before flying it to Pakistan, Dubai and Afghanistan, where it is now parked.

"What is unusual is that the prime minister made a public statement at the start of the crisis that the government will not give way at all. Now the reality is that negotiators have been sent to Afghanistan."

"The impression is that there is more than one voice speaking to the people and to the world at large."

A team of seven Indian negotiators arrived in the southern Afghan town of Kandahar late

Monday to start talks with the hijackers.

The negotiations continued Tuesday on the hijacker's demand for the release of a Pakistani cleric from an Indian prison in exchange for the safe return of the 160 passengers and crew.

The hijackers killed one passenger but freed 27 others, mostly women and children, in Dubai. The remaining passengers were mainly Indian but included a score of foreign nationals.

Rangarajan said the government had been forced into a high-stakes game, in which it had to deal "firmly vis-a-vis the hijackers and gently vis-a-vis the hostages."

"The international spotlight is on Vajpayee," he said. "The government is being tested across-the-board in its negotiations, succour and diplomacy."

Security tightened as 14 killed in Pak sectarian shooting

HARIPUR, Pakistan, Dec 28: Pakistan tightened security in its northern areas today after 14 people were killed in a sectarian shooting after a funeral, local government officials said, reports AFP.

Muslim Shi'ite militants opened fire Monday on a group of Sunnis near a shrine in Sikandarpur, a suburb of Haripur city, in northwestern Pakistan.

Four Shi'ite gunmen shot at the crowd of about 60 people. They killed 13 immediately and injured six, one of whom later died in hospital, a hospital official said.

Police were still hunting the gunmen who fled after the shooting.

"We have put the security forces on high alert," said Ataur Rehman, a local administration official.

Shops and markets in the city were closed and hundreds gathered outside their homes for the burial of the shooting victims, an AFP photographer said.

The victims included Mohammed Yunus, the city president of Pakistan's largest fundamentalist party Jamaat-i-Islami and Maulana Tayyab, a member of the radical Sunni group Sipahi-Sahaba Pakistan, witnesses said.

The killing was the first outbreak of sectarian violence in Pakistan since the military seized power in a coup in October, overthrowing prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Pakistan has been plagued by sectarian attacks blamed on religious militants in recent years which have claimed hundreds of lives.

Shi'ites make up about 20 per cent of the country's 130 million population, who are mostly Sunnis.

Monday's attack appeared to be linked to a dispute between the two sects over the construction of a room at a Shi'ite shrine next to a graveyard where a funeral was being held.

Mohammed Iqbal, who witnessed the killing, said crowds

returning after the burial of a Sunni man, stopped at the shrine and demanded builders stop work on an extension.

The gunmen were guards supervising the work at the site, Iqbal said.

Sectarian blood-letting seriously troubled Sharif's government.

In the weeks before he was deposed, a wave of sectarian attacks left dozens of people dead, including some prominent figures, and raised pressure on his government to curb the blood-letting.

Sharif, vowing tougher measures to stem the unrest, had warned that terrorists trained across the border in Afghanistan, ruled by the Sunni fundamentalist Taliban, had been involved in the violence.

His government launched a crackdown, detaining hundreds of religious militants from different groups, and offered cash rewards for the arrest of terrorists.

BRIEFLY

Plane crash kills 6 in Colombia: Six Colombian soldiers travelling in a military plane that disappeared in the jungle bordering Panama likely were killed, a top air force official said Monday. AFP reports from Bogota.

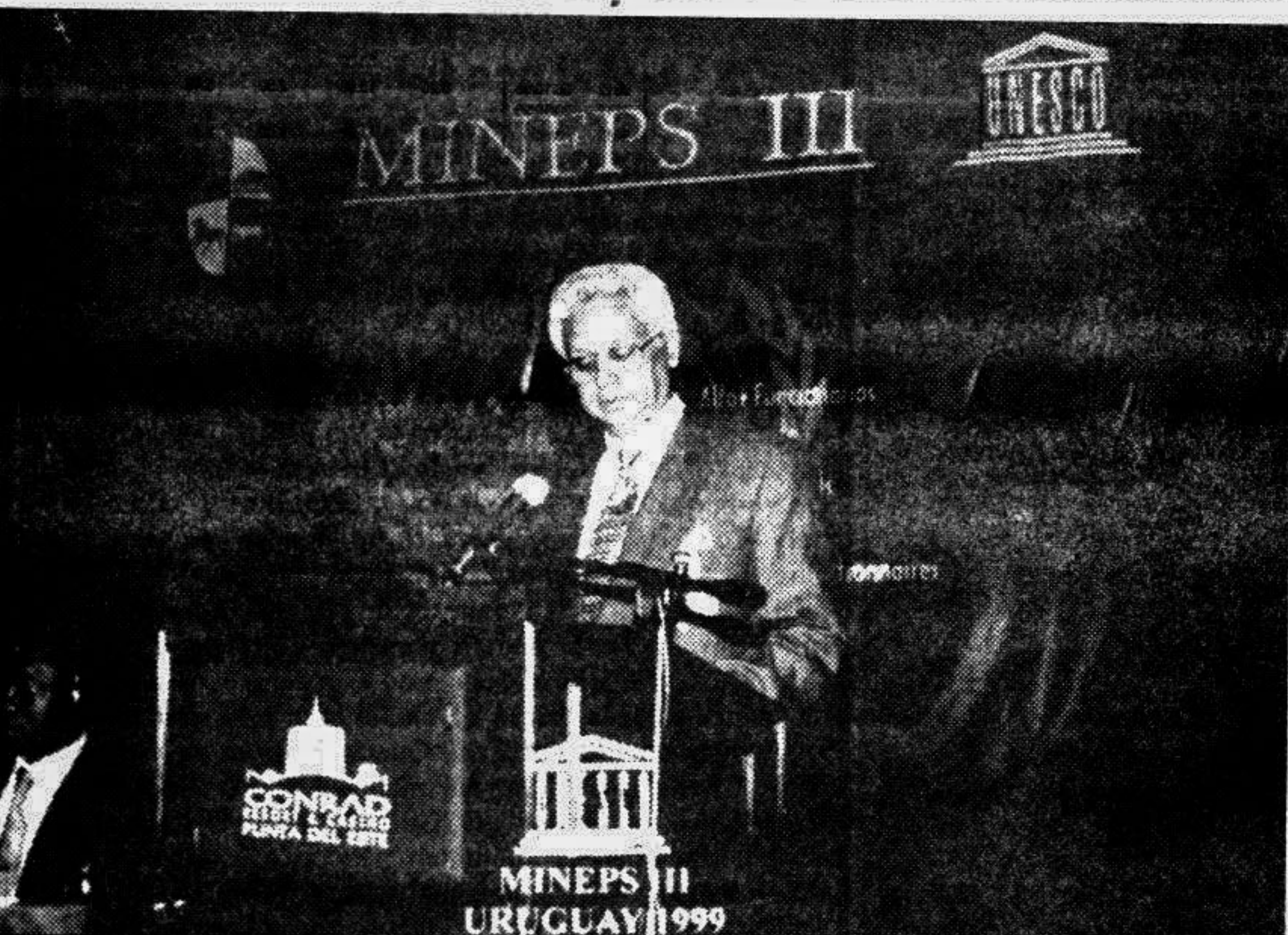
Debris from the Turbo Commander-1000 was found Monday morning on a mountain near Bahia Solano, some 610 km northwest of the capital, General Luis Garcia said. The craft had disappeared from radar December 20 while on a flight between Medellin and Bahia Solano.

Annan hails polls in Guinea-Bissau: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan welcomed successful presidential and legislative elections in the West African country of Guinea-Bissau in a report published Monday. AFP reports from United Nations.

The elections, which took place November 28, constituted "an important step forward in the ongoing transition to democracy and the restoration of peace and normalcy," Annan said. The elections should pave the way for a return to democracy in the small Portuguese-speaking country after a coup d'etat on May 7 against president Joao Bernardo Vieira.

12 killed as train hit truck in Delhi: A speeding passenger train plowed through a truck carrying pilgrims in southern India, killing 12 people and injuring 29 others Monday, domestic news agencies reported. AP says from New Delhi.

The accident occurred as the truck tried to cross the track as the Coimbatore-Madurai Express train hurtled toward it at Idappatti, a village in Tamil Nadu state. United News of India news agency reported. Three people were hospitalised in critical condition.



The UNESCO-Sponsored MINES III Conference of ministers in charge of sports and physical education was held in Punta Del Este, Uruguay from November 30 to December 3. Bangladesh Permanent Representative to UNESCO Ambassador Syed Muazzem Ali who led the Bangladesh delegation at this conference was unanimously elected as the Chairman of the Drafting Group. Ambassador Ali seen presenting the Punta Del Este Declaration at the closing session of the conference.

Hijackers refuse to accept food for hostages

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan, Dec 28: Hijackers holding 160 hostages aboard an Indian Airlines jet in Afghanistan twice refused to accept food for the passengers, a Taliban official told AFP today.

The hijackers refused to accept lunch and dinner for their hostages on Monday because they were angry that guards from Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia surrounded the plane, said Kandahar's airport manager Haji Rahmat Ullah.

But the hijackers did accept a breakfast of eggs, bread and mineral water on Tuesday, he said.

"The surrounding of the plane by the commandos made them angry and so they refused both lunch and dinner," Ullah said.

Taliban guards surrounded the aircraft on Monday after the hijackers warned they would start killing passengers if their demands were not met within a deadline.

The deadline passed with no apparent violence after the Taliban threatened to storm the plane and New Delhi said they would send negotiators. Negotiations were still underway Tuesday.

Poor communications hampers negotiations

Meanwhile, talks between Indian negotiators and the hijackers of an Indian Airlines plane in Afghanistan are being hampered by poor communications, Indian officials told relatives of the hostages here today.

"The communication links with the hijacked aircraft are poor and keep on getting cut off," Indian Airlines official Vikram Badshah told a briefing attended by several dozen family members.

Nevertheless the discussions went on through the night. They resumed this morning at around 10:00 a.m. (10:30 am BST), he added.

"All on board are currently safe, although they are suffering from fatigue and exhaustion. Food is being served. Toilets are being serviced and they were allowed to change their clothes from their hand baggage."

Joint secretary at the Civil Aviation Ministry Sunil Arora said the government had to be selective in providing information on the progress of the negotiations.

US condemns hijacking of Indian plane

WASHINGTON, Dec 28: The United States on Monday condemned as "inhuman and terrorist" the Christmas Eve hijacking of Indian Airlines Airbus-300 now sitting on an airstrip in Afghanistan where negotiators continued a desperate bid to end the crisis, reports AFP.

"We consider this terrorist act inhuman and we call for the immediate safe release of all hostages," State Department spokesman Philip Reeker said in a statement.

The United States government condemns in the strongest terms the hijacking of (the plane) and the holding of 160 passengers as hostages."

Jennifer Lopez released

NEW YORK, Dec 28: Police here released actress Jennifer Lopez late Monday, but charged her rap star boyfriend Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs with possession of firearms and stolen property after a shooting incident here, police said, reports AFP.

The couple were held for questioning after shots were exchanged in an incident around 2:30 a.m. (1:30 pm BST) at "Club New York" near Times Square. A nine-millimetre revolver found in Combs's vehicle was later discovered to be stolen.

"They were charged with criminal possession of a weapon and criminal possession of stolen property," New York Police Department (NYPD) spokeswoman Carmen Melendez said.

VHP to build Ram Temple, BJP has nothing to do

AYODHYA, Dec 28: The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) yesterday said Ram Temple at Ayodhya would be constructed by it on the advice of saints and that BJP had nothing to do with that, reports PTI.

"We are working under the directives of saints and mahants of the country and the Ram Temple construction work would be started on their advice only. VHP president Ashok Singhal said addressing a conference at party headquarters here.

Fujimori to run for third term

LIMA, Dec 28: Peru's President Alberto Fujimori said on Monday he would run for an unprecedented third term in April's elections in a bid to consolidate his free market reforms and tough anti-rebel policies of the last decade, reports Reuters.

Polls show voters could reelect the two-term leader, the hemisphere's longest-serving democratically elected president, despite economic downturn, widespread human rights criticism and opposition accusations his candidacy is unconstitutional.

Discovery lands

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida, Dec 28: The US space shuttle Discovery landed at the Kennedy Space Center here Monday, completing its eight-day mission to repair the Hubble telescope, NASA said, reports AFP.

The shuttle and its seven-member crew touched down at 7:00 a.m. (6:01 am BST Tuesday) in a night's dark sky, about two hours behind schedule.

The US space agency earlier postponed the shuttle's afternoon landing due to strong winds over Florida. The end of the eight-day mission had originally been scheduled for 5:24 p.m. (4:24 am BST).

"We have crosswinds above the acceptable limit for the shuttle set at 15 knots," National Aeronautics and Space Administration spokeswoman Eileen Hawley said earlier Monday.

Government of Bangladesh Office of the Executive Engineer (RHD) Road Division, Dinajpur Notice Inviting Tenders (RHD) Road Division, Dinajpur

1. Tender Notice : 12 EE/DRD/1999-2000.
2. Name of works : Construction of over bridge in front of Dinajpur Zilla School at 1st KM of Dinajpur-Birganj-Panchagarh road under Dinajpur Road Division during the year 1999-2000.
3. Estimated cost : Tk 56,45,787/-
4. Earnest money : Tk 1,12,916/-
5. Time allowed : 120 (one hundred twenty) days for completion of work
6. Eligibility of contractor : 'A to C' Special.
7. Name of offices where tender document will be sold : 1) Divisional Commissioner, Rajshahi. 2) Executive Engineer (RHD), Road Division, Rangpur/Dinajpur/Thakurgaon/Panchagarh/Nilphamari.
8. Name of offices where the tender bids will be received : 1) Addl Chief Engineer (RHD), Rangpur Zone, Rangpur. 2) Divisional Commissioner, Rajshahi. 3) Superintending Engineer (RHD), Monitoring and Evaluation Circle, Sarak Bhaban, Ramna, Dhaka. 4) Superintending Engineer (RHD), Road Circle, Dinajpur. 5) Executive Engineer (RHD), Road Division/Dinajpur/Thakurgaon/Panchagarh/Nilphamari.
9. Last date of selling tender documents during office hours : 4-1-2000.
10. Last date and time for receiving tender bids : Up to 12:30 PM on 5-1-2000.
11. Date and time of opening tender bids : At 12:45 PM on 5-1-2000.
12. Date and time of opening bids (at the office of the U/S) : At 11:00 AM on 12-1-2000.
13. Date of lottery : At 11:00 AM on 16-1-2000. (if necessary)
14. Chargeable head : 168-RBF.

DDP-28539-22/12 G-2179 Md Abdul Halim Meah Executive Engineer (RHD) Road Division, Dinajpur.

Directorate General Defence Purchase Ministry of Defence New Airport Road, Tejgaon, Dhaka-1215 Tender/Re-Tender Notice

1. Sealed tenders in foreign currency are invited from bonafide manufacturers/dealers/suppliers/indentors (enlisted firms and firms applied for enlistment in DGDP) for supply of the following items for Bangladesh Navy.

Sl No	Name of Items & Qty	From	To	Date of Opening	Currency	Tender No
1.	Spares for Decompression Chamber (Qty-13 L/I)	27.12.99	03.02.2000	06.02.2000	F/C	6341/NP-2
2.	Spares for Upper Deck DG (Qty-58 L/I)	27.12.99	03.02.2000	06.02.2000	F/C	6342/NP-2
3.	Spares for Diesel Generator (Qty-120 L/I)	27.12.99	03.02.2000	06.02.2000	F/C	6343/NP-2
4.	Spares for Caterpillar Main Engine (Qty-63 L/I)	27.12.99	03.02.2000	06.02.2000	F/C	6344/NP-2
5.	Spares for Main Engine (Qty-a-196, b-95 L/I)	27.12.99	03.02.2000	06.02.2000	F/C	6345/NP-2
6.	Various size Rope Manila (Qty-30 Coil)	27.12.99	03.02.2000	06.02.2000	F/C	6346/NP-2
7.	Spares for Diesel Generator (Qty-12 L/I)	27.12.99	03.02.2000	06.02.2000	F/C	6347/NP-2
8.	Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat with Engine (Qty-02 Nos)	27.12.99	03.02.2000	06.02.2000	F/C	6348/NP-3
9.	Spares for Ruston Diesel Engine (Qty-281 L/I)	27.12.99	03.02.2000	06.02.2000	F/C	6349/NP-2
10.	Canvas Awning 36" width White (Qty-6,000 Mtr)	27.12.99	20.01.2000	23.01.2000	F/C	6135/NP-3 Re-Tender
11.	Various MS Plate (Qty-25 L/I)	27.12.99	20.01.2000	23.01.2000	F/C	6048/NP-3 Re-Tender

2. Tender schedule with detailed specifications/conditions will be available on payment as per IT selling rate (not refundable) during office hours between 0800 hours to 1300 hours. The tender can be dropped latest by 1000 hrs and opened at 1005 hours on the specified date of opening in the presence of tenderers (if present).

ISPR/Misc/99/915 DFP-28425-22/12 G-2178 Lt Commander BN For Director General

Fighting rages at special police HQs in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Dec 28: Fighting kept up for a second day in the headquarters of the Indian police counter-insurgency wing in the Kashmir capital Srinagar today, following a daring assault by Muslim separatists, reports AFP.

At least six people, including the acting head of the Special Operation Group (SOG) in Srinagar, Superintendent Gan Shyam, were believed to have been killed and 15 more injured, a police official said.

Around four heavily armed Muslim militants forced their way into the SOG headquarters compound early Monday evening and barricaded themselves into one building.

Death toll mounts as fresh storm hits France, Spain

PARIS, Dec 28: A new killer storm hit France and Spain late Monday, just a day after Europe's worst ever tempest, with the total death toll topping 100 as a trail of destruction swept across the continent, reports AFP.

France bore the brunt of the fierce winds for the second day running. Monday's storm hit the southwest of the country leaving at least 12 dead and one fisherman missing at sea. Many were injured by falling trees and debris.

A further five people died in northern Spain as the storm

force winds, which reached 150 kilometres per hour (93 mph) in France, returned to the Atlantic coastline.

The new assault came as emergency services across western Europe struggled to clean up the damage from Sunday's fatal storms.

In France 40 people were killed Sunday -- almost half the toll of 82 counted on the day across Britain, France, Spain, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy as the storm swept eastwards.