

New millennium dawns across the world

Indian FM blames hijack on Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Jan 1: Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh pointed an accusing finger at Pakistan Saturday over the Indian Airlines hijack drama...

The eight-day hijack ended Friday with all 160 passengers and crew released in exchange for three pro-Kashmiri Muslim militants jailed in India.

Also allowed to go free were the five militant hijackers, who disappeared from the Kandahar Airport runway in southern Afghanistan as soon as the hijack ended and whose current whereabouts are unknown.

It is clear that the terrorists and hijackers are going to Quetta (in northwest Pakistan), Singh told reporters.

Our initial inquiry reveals that the hijackers are Pakistani nationals and the majority of the terrorists whose release was sought by the hijackers were also Pakistani nationals, Singh said.

Although he made no specific charge against Islamabad, Singh said New Delhi would be taking up the hijacking issue with the Pakistani authorities in an 'appropriate' fashion.

Meanwhile, the hijacked Indian Airlines plane returned to New Delhi on Saturday from southern Afghanistan, where its engines had been kept running almost non-stop after Muslim militants seized the flight on Christmas eve.

Pakistan, India swap lists of N-installations

ISLAMABAD, Jan 1: Pakistan and India have exchanged lists of their nuclear installations and facilities through diplomatic channels, a foreign office statement said Saturday, reports AFP.

The annual swap was under an agreement signed by Pakistan and India on prohibition of attacks against each others nuclear installations and facilities, it said.

Under the agreement both countries are required to exchange the list of their nuclear installations on the first working day of every year.

The agreement was signed in 1990 following former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Pakistan.

Since then the two sides exchange updated lists of their facilities every year.

India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in May 1998.

Bloody fighting in Grozny

MOSCOW, Jan 1: The New Year brought no peace to the embattled Chechen capital Saturday, where bloody battles raged and Russian troops were losing 10 men each day, military officials told the NTV television station, reports AFP.

Federal forces suffered several dozen wounded daily as Russia intensified efforts to seize control of the capital of the breakaway Chechen republic, the private channel said.

A senior interior ministry troop commander, Colonel Valery Zhurav, told NTV that 50 Chechen fighters had been killed overnight.

The guerrillas had been wiped out as they attempted to flee Grozny for the town of Shali, 25 km southeast of the capital, the deputy head of interior ministry troops in Chechnya said.

Grozny's estimated 20,000-40,000 residents began the New Year much like the one ended, covering in freezing cellars to escape the constant shelling by besieging Russian forces witnessed by an AFP photographer near the capital.

Meanwhile, Russian warplanes continued to pound targets in the east, southeast, and south of the breakaway republic, notably in the Serzhen-Yurt, Vedeno and Shtati.

Beijing police detain five dissidents

BEIJING, Jan 1: Beijing police Saturday detained five political and religious dissidents including democracy activist He Deputo for protesting at a New Year's morning meeting, a rights group said, reports AFP.

Four other people expected to attend the meeting -- including He Xintong, the wife of jailed dissident leader Xu Wenli -- have also gone missing and "may be detained," the Hong Kong-based Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said.

The figures were due to meet earlier Saturday at the home of Christian dissident Xu Yonghai to celebrate the new millennium, praise God and discuss theological issues, the centre said.

But police apparently were lying in wait and picked up Xu Yonghai -- a medical doctor -- He Deputo and three others identified as Sha Yuguang, Hou Jie and Liu Fenggang for questioning.

They are in custody at Fengsheng police station in the capital's central Xicheng district, it said.

Beijing authorities typically clamp down on dissidents around key holidays -- especially when the country's leaders are making public appearances -- to prevent any embarrassing protest.

LONDON, Jan 1: Spectacular celebrations united millions of people across the globe on Saturday, as the new millennium was ushered in untroubled by computer failures, terrorist attacks or mass suicides, reports AFP.

In New York, President Bill Clinton pledged the United States would uphold the torch of freedom as North America became the last continent to usher in an apparently crisis-free millennium with extravagant celebrations.

Almost three million revelers cheered in Times Square as New York's symbol of the new millennium -- a dazzling Waterford crystal ball -- was lowered to mark the New Year.

As the clock struck midnight, fireworks joined the ball's laser light show, bursting over the so-called 'crossroads of the world.' A chorus of the traditional Auld Lang Syne New Year anthem rang out and people hugged and kissed.

In Washington, the towering Washington Monument was spectacularly illuminated with cascades of fireworks, the highlight of a three-hour millennium show on the central Mall which had included film star Will Smith and singer Tom Jones.

At midnight (1100 BST), Clinton and a group of children lit a fuse setting the capital's skyline ablaze with showers of sparks and streaks of coloured light.

In London, fireworks and the traditional rendition of Auld Lang Syne marked midnight GMT at Millennium Dome directly over the Greenwich Meridian.

The midnight sky above the British capital was lit up Saturday by a spectacular display of pyrotechnics, when on the stroke of midnight, more than 40,000 fireworks were set off in a carefully-coordinated movement along a five-kilometre (three-mile) stretch of the River Thames.

Queen Elizabeth, Prime Minister Tony Blair, his pregnant wife Cherie and thousands of others toasted each other with champagne at the dome, the showcase of festivities in London.

One hour earlier Paris brought in the millennium with an explosion of light and sound that made the Eiffel Tower appear to take off like a rocket and shook the entire city to its foundations.

With three minutes to go before midnight, the base of the century-old structure exploded in a white star-burst, as the first of 20,000 flash-bulbs and 5,000 fireworks erupted in a synchronized frenzy.

Traditional street parties and hi-tech firework displays captured the imaginations of

revelers in Madrid, Rome, Vienna, Berlin and in towns and villages across the continent.

On a truly global night of celebration while 700,000 Swedes braved freezing temperatures to attend an open-air party in Stockholm's old town the citizens of Kinshasa, capital of the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo greeted midnight with bongoes and cries of "Bonana."

Most police forces in Europe reported that crowds had been well behaved during what was seen as a family event. The only major outbreaks of violence took place in Denmark where a skirmish between stone-throwing leftist youths and Copenhagen police led to four arrests, and the now traditional spate of arson attacks on parked cars in Paris and some regional French towns.

After the enthusiasm in Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific and much of Asia a strong dose of politics and religion intervened as the Middle East only partially joined in the festivities.

In Bethlehem in the West Bank, 2,000 doves soared into the air to the crackling of fireworks in an unprecedented party for the Palestinians, coinciding as it did with the night-time feasting of the final Friday of Ramadan.

In Israel rumours were rife

that Christian sects could perform a mass suicide, but as midnight passed Jerusalem, in the grip of the Jewish sabbath, was one of the quietest cities on the planet.

The other main celebration in the Middle East was in Egypt, which ushered in its eighth millennium with a "cyberconcert" by French musician Jean-Michel Jarre at the pyramids.

Elsewhere the overwhelmingly Muslim Middle East largely turned its back on the festivities, with a Saudi prayer leader sternly warning that it was strictly forbidden to mark the occasion.

The New Year had got underway hours earlier, on tiny, uninhabited Millennium Island, off Kiribati, and moved across the South Pacific to be welcomed by vast crowds packing cities across New Zealand, Australia and East Asia.

In Auckland the new century's first baby, a boy, was reportedly born and not even looming clouds could hold back the biggest crowds Sydney has ever seen for a massive 3.8 million-dollar firework display.

Pak border police on alert against plane hijackers

ISLAMABAD, Jan 1: Pakistan Saturday ordered an alert along its border with Afghanistan amid reports that five Muslim militants who released a hijacked Indian airliner at Kandahar may try to enter a neighbouring country, reports AFP.

"We are cautiously alert. We will not allow them entry," Major Rana Aftab, in charge of security at the Khyber Pass border crossing told AFP by telephone.

"We don't have photographs of the hijackers but we have orders that any unwanted person must be stopped," he said.

The hijackers on Friday freed 160 hostages after India released three jailed pro-Kashmiri militants, ending an eight-day ordeal.

Kashmir issue Pak president calls for implementing UN resolutions

ISLAMABAD, Jan 1: Pakistan's President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar today called for implementing United Nations resolutions on Kashmir in a message on the advent of the new millennium, reports AFP.

"We should enter the next millennium with faith and determination to bring peace and prosperity for all of humanity," Tarar said.

"The immediate challenge we face is the non-discriminatory implementation of the UN resolutions," he said.

Tarar said the people in Kashmir were facing "repression and denial of basic human rights."

Jiang regrets Yeltsin's departure

BEIJING, Jan 1: Chinese President Jiang Zemin has sent a letter to former Russian president Boris Yeltsin expressing regret at his abrupt resignation, the official Xinhua news agency reported Saturday, reports AFP.

But he expressed optimism about working with Yeltsin's hand-picked successor Vladimir Putin.

"I have got to know Acting President Putin and I am ready to establish a good working relationship with him," Jiang was quoted as saying in the letter dated Friday.

The Chinese president said he was pleased with progress in relations between the two giant neighbours.

Jiang hailed Yeltsin's "unremitting efforts" to boost China-Russian ties during his presidency.

Russia faces host of problems following Yeltsin's resignation

MOSCOW, Jan 1: Russia entered the third millennium today with a new leader but a host of old problems left after the shock resignation of Boris Yeltsin, which acting President Vladimir Putin must tackle fast, reports Reuters.

2000 without any of the feared Y2K computer glitches, Yeltsin upstaged New Year celebrations by announcing he was stepping down early as leader of the world's largest country.

It was a typically dramatic move from a politician whose career was marked by grand gestures and surprises that

wrong-footed opponents and left the outside world gaping.

By quitting now, he virtually guaranteed that Putin would be chosen president in an election expected on March 26. He simultaneously relieved many Western politicians -- and potential investors -- by bringing forward the transfer of power.

"He took this step at the right time and at the same time absolutely unexpectedly," said Boris Nemtsov, a young reformer once touted as a possible successor to Yeltsin. "He arrived on the scene beautifully and left beautifully, too."

World reaction to the seemingly inexorable rise of ex-KGB spy Putin was largely positive, if guarded.

At 47, his youth and vigour impress little is known about his views beyond sweeping remarks about adhering to market reforms and his uncompromising stance on the military campaign against rebel Chechnya. The war there carried on without pause.

US officials and others were encouraged by Putin's vow to uphold democratic freedoms and keep foreign policy on track.

"These things are all to the good and what we need to see now is what actually happens in practice," a senior US official said in Washington. "I would not expect there to be major change in policy."

Some Western officials expressed reservations about Putin's tough line on security -- he has pledged to preserve and enhance Russia's intelligence community -- and urged him to end the war against Chechen rebels and so ease civilians' suffering.

On the world stage, Putin's first foreign trip as acting president is expected to be to the Holy Land to mark the first Orthodox Christmas of the new millennium on January 6-7.



Russian acting President and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (L) receives the nuclear briefcase with the keys and connection to Russia's nuclear weaponry from responsible officers in Kremlin on Friday. In a televised speech that stunned Russia, President Boris Yeltsin announced he was stepping down on Friday. — AFP photo

4 revellers shot dead in S Africa

NONGOMA, South Africa, Jan 1: A lone gunman shot dead four revellers and wounded two others just after midnight at a small New Year's Eve party in rural eastern South Africa, police said Saturday, reports AFP.

The gunman opened fire with an AK-47 assault rifle on the six at about five minutes after midnight, police said.

The victims, aged between 25 and 30 years, had been celebrating the new year at a small party in the rural Nongoma area, nearly 200 km northeast of the coastal city of Durban.

The suspect was known to police but the motive for the slaughter was unclear, police said.

Sudanese cabinet resigns

Sudan state television reported on Friday that government ministers and state governors had resigned and President Omar Hassan al-Bashir had asked them to stay in office until a new administration could be formed, reports Reuters from Khartoum.

"In a meeting with the president of the republic, the ministers and governors requested the president relieve them to enable him to form a new government," the television said.

French police seize explosives

French police have seized a tonne of explosives belonging to Spanish Basque guerrilla group ETA, a week after two powerful van bombs were stopped in Spain, police sources said on Friday, reports Reuters from France.

In a separate incident, French police arrested on Friday ETA member Pedro Maria Leguina Auro, who was carrying false papers when he flew into Paris's Roissy airport. Spanish television said he was reported to be wanted in Spain for 14 murders and had reportedly flown to Paris from Mexico.

Hijack hostages grapple with the facts

NEW DELHI, Jan 1: India's freed hijack hostages are grappling to shake off the trauma and confusion of their eight-day ordeal, and take in what actually happened around them as they sat on a lonely runway in Afghanistan, reports AFP.

Cut-off for more than a week inside an Indian Airlines Airbus, many of the passengers who were freed and returned home Friday, had very little understanding of the very events of which they had been at the epicentre.

As the world watched the drama at Kandahar Airport unfold on television, some on board flight IC814 were not even sure where they were.

hore or elsewhere in Pakistan, while another had been guessing Oman or probably Bangladesh.

"When they got off and were told they were in Kandahar, they had to ask where it was. None of them even realised that they were in Afghanistan," said one of the freed hostages' relatives.

"For the first four days, no one knew where we were," admitted passenger Prasad Bisu. "It was only through a food pack four days later that I learned we were in Afghanistan."

Personal confusion also figured in the tragedy of hostage Rachna Katyal, whose husband Rupin was stabbed to death by the hijackers -- the only casualty of the crisis.

National sympathy in India for Rachna was compounded by the realisation, when she returned to New Delhi, that she was still unaware of the fate

met by her husband. The couple, who were only married on December 3, were returning from a honeymoon in Nepal when the plane was hijacked.

"The girl still does not know anything," Rupin's uncle Kanwal Katyal told reporters. "We are trying to prepare her mentally, before breaking the news to her."

A doctor who attended Rachna at the airport, painted a bleak picture of her condition. She's in very bad shape. Rachna doesn't recall anything and is only searching for her husband everywhere," Dr. R.K. Sinha said.

The hijackers deliberately kept their hostages in the dark about the progress of negotiations with the Indian government, or taunted them with misinformation.

"We were continuously given the impression that the government was doing nothing for



Fireworks light the sky over the exclusive Palace hotel which is illuminated by a fantastic light-show, in St. Moritz, Switzerland, on the New Year's Day. — AFP photo

Millennium baby

AUCKLAND, Jan 1: The new millennium's first child is a baby boy born here at 12:01 am Saturday (1701 BST Friday). New Zealand media reports said, reports AFP.

Fiji's first millennium birth, a boy, is already 5,000 Fiji dollars (2500 US) richer for being first.

The world's first baby of the new millennium, also a boy, was delivered at Waitakere Hospital in west Auckland.

Radio New Zealand quoted hospital authorities saying they could give no details immediately as the family wanted privacy.

Television New Zealand said six babies were born with 20 minutes of the millennium's arrival.

In Fiji, which greeted the millennium at the same time as New Zealand, the first birth occurred at 12.18 am Saturday.

Mother Ruci Ruvekuia, 23, gave birth to 3.69 kilogram Taniela in the Lambasa Hospital. They are Fijians from the village of Nasekula.

The government previously announced a reward for the first baby.

Twins born century apart

BERLIN, Jan 1: The first baby of the new millennium born in Berlin Saturday is the second of twins, the first of which was born Friday in 1999, the Saint Joseph hospital said, reports AFP.

The younger twin was born a minute after midnight, while his brother made it into the world five minutes earlier.

The two baby boys and their 35-year-old mother were said to be doing fine.

Baby named '2000'

ANKARA, Jan 1: A Turkish couple in the southeastern province of Mus had a baby at one after midnight Saturday and named the new-born "Ikbin" -- 2,000 in Turkish, in honor of the new millennium, the Anadolu news agency reported, says AFP.

The 3.5-kilo girl was the 12th child of Ibrahim and Cemile Akcar.

"I have become father to 11 children, seven of them girls, but I will never forget the birth of Ikbin," Ibrahim Akcar told Anadolu.

The governor of Mus rushed to the hospital bearing presents as soon as he learned about the birth of the first millennium baby in the city, the agency said.

Millennium twins

AMMAN, Jan 1: Millennium twins were born to a Jordanian couple as the clocks struck midnight to usher in the New Year in the kingdom, officials at Al-Bashir hospital told AFP.

Kifaa Ghneimat, mother of a two-year-old girl, gave birth to twin boys, Abdel Fattah and Mohammed, they said.

The cries of the twin bundle of joy were covered up by the sound of fireworks that lit up the sky over Amman when midnight struck.

No official millennium celebrations were organised in Jordan, where the mostly Muslim population is observing Ramadan.

Meanwhile, officials reported no sign of the millennium bug in any of the kingdom's vital sectors.

Millennium bug dispute

PHNOM PENH, Jan 1: A dispute in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh over superstitions that a deadly "millennium bug" will kill people who fail to eat a certain type of cake has left two men dead, reports said Saturday.

The Khmer-language Rasmel Kampuchea newspaper said 58-year-old Tan Sokha became "very angry" after he failed to convince Kao Ly, 72, that he would die if he failed to eat a custard, rice and lard cake wrapped in banana leaf.

The ensuing dispute between the two friends over the cake rumour -- which has been circulating around Phnom Penh for weeks -- turned to brutal violence and the two men later died in hospital, the report said.

Cambodia is a deeply superstitious country, and the trauma caused by decades of civil war means even trivial disputes frequently end in recourse to extreme violence.

Minor faults strike Japanese N-plants

TOKYO, Jan 1: Computer-related faults struck four nuclear power plants in Japan at the start of 2000 Saturday but only one could be related to the millennium bug, officials said, reports AFP.

None of the glitches, three of them occurring within one hour into the new millennium, posed any danger despite vexing a nation still haunted by a nuclear accident three months ago, they said.

A system to monitor radiation levels malfunctioned at a nuclear plant in Ishikawa, central Japan, immediately after the turn of the year, officials said.

Two of the five monitoring computers stopped displaying data.

"This incident is probably related to the Y2K problem,"

said Shigeru Komatsu, in charge of nuclear power plant operations at the government's natural resources and energy agency.

At a plant in Onagawa, northern Japan, an alarm sounded for 10 minutes just two minutes after midnight, indicating faulty transmissions of data on radiation levels, sea water temperature and other factors.

But a similar glitch occurred eight hours later at the Onagawa plant. "The faults were found to be unrelated to Y2K," said Hiroyuki Kondo, another official at the agency.

Two monitors for a coastal nuclear power plant in Takahama, north of Osaka, failed to properly transmit data on radiation levels from 1 a.m. (2200 BST).

Panama Canal now Panama's canal

PANAMA CITY, Jan 1: Thousands of Panamanians poured into the streets in jubilation Friday as the country assumed full sovereignty over the strategic Panama Canal, controlled by the United States for the past 85 years, reports AFP.

As President Mireya Moscoso hoisted Panama's national red-white-and-blue banner on the canal's administrative building at 12:01 p.m. local time (2301 BST), the crowd erupted with joy at what has been described as a seminal event in Panamanian history.

The 80-km long canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans was transferred under 1977 treaties signed by president Omar Torrijos and

Jimmy Carter. Earlier Friday, Moscoso received in the building US Ambassador Simon Ferro, who handed her a diplomatic note, officially putting an end to US control over the canal.

As US Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera looked on, Moscoso declared that now the canal belongs to all Panamanians.

"The canal is ours," she exclaimed. "God has given it to us. We are entering the 21st century completely sovereign."

Moscoso evoked her country's tortuous relations with the United States to underscore the magnitude of the victory she saw in the handover of the canal to Panama.



An unidentified hostage waves as a group of hostages disembark from a plane at New Delhi's international airport on Friday, after spending 8 days in a hijacked Indian Airlines jet in Kandahar, Afghanistan. — AFP photo