

Millennium party over, world back to old routine

PARIS, Jan 2: The party of the century was over today and it was time for the big clean-up as the world prepared for another 1,000 years of the daily round and doomsday sects felt foiled, reports AFP.

The first millennium baby arrived in New Zealand at one minute after midnight, and a 16-year-old Sri Lankan gave birth to what were thought to be the millennium's first triplets.

Meanwhile in a Malaysian village locals were abuzz with millennium talk focussed on farmer Long Chong Shen who apparently sighted a large ape-like animal known as "mahaws" in his orchard.

He saw two of the "bigfoot" beasts - one around 1.8 metres tall, covered with long black shiny hair, and the other around 1.5 metres with brown hair. The animals just stared at him and walked back into the jungle.

But others fearing or hoping for strange signs and portents - not to speak of cataclysmic events - were left feeling de-

flated.

A Philippine cult vainly dug underground tunnels and piled up provisions after predicting an "all consuming rain of fire" on January 1.

The leader of Papua New Guinea's Rainbow Church began the new millennium in jail after preaching the world would go dark Saturday and all expatriates would vanish from the country as the clock struck midnight.

In Las Vegas, reveller Chris Kennedy took a sanguine view of apocalypse now. The prospect of midnight catastrophe was just one more reason to party beforehand with his friends, he said.

"Either we will have a big hangover in the morning or we'll be dead," said Kennedy, of Salt Lake City.

In Washington, his president spoke out against any tendency towards US isolationism, saying US peace and security in the new millennium depended on engagement with the rest of the world.

Bill Clinton had earlier paid tribute to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who provided the end-of-millennium surprise with his resignation.

Some 10,000 Russians flocked to Red Square for midnight, only hours after the announcement.

Meanwhile grim reality continued in Chechnya, where Russian fighting flared up, with Russian forces accusing rebels of attempting another attack with toxic chemicals.

Chinese President Jiang Zemin also struck a grim note in his New Year's address, stepping up pressure for Taiwan's reunification with the mainland.

"China will not sit idle and tolerate any act calculated to split China, pursue the so-called independence of Taiwan, or harm the fundamental interests of the Chinese people on both sides of the Taiwan Straits," he said.

In Britain, Prime Minister Tony Blair looked ahead to the

new century with characteristic breeziness as the nation cleaned up after declaring its millennium celebrations the biggest, best and safest party ever.

Meanwhile thieves stole a valuable Cezanne oil painting from a museum at Oxford while revellers were still thronging the streets outside.

Grim reality also intervened in Venezuela, where for thousands left homeless by killer floods the first day of 2000 was marked Saturday with trauma, disease and depression.

At refugee centres housing those who lost all to the torrential rains, women and children stood in line for hours awaiting medical attention, with children suffering from diarrhoea or fever.

In the Middle East, Israelis relaxed after none of the three things they feared - suicides by Christian cranks, the Y2K bug and Palestinian unrest - occurred.

In Bethlehem, 2,000 doves soared into the air to the crack-

ling of fireworks in an unprecedented party for Palestinians. But elsewhere the Lebanese army was combing an area in the north after losing four soldiers killed and two missing in an ambush by fundamentalists.

Meanwhile a year-long Bible-reading project began in Spain's Valencia Cathedral as the clock struck midnight.

Members of more than 100 churches, religious, sporting and social associations will take part in the readings, designed to "unite people of goodwill and bring God's word to life."

And a race to produce the world's first millennium wine underway in the Australian outback town of Bourke where a couple began harvesting their grapes as the clocked ticked over to 2000.

The first drop to be called Genesis Chardonnay 2000 and expected to be ready some time this week, has already been secured by Christie's for auction later this year.



An Egyptian policeman sits on a camel as the sun rises at the Giza pyramids, south of Cairo, on the New Year's Day, at the end of a 12-hour concert by French multi-media wizard Jean Michel Jarre. Some 50,000 people attended the music and laser show, which ended as the first rays of light hit the ancient wonders.

-AFP photo

BJP to pay heavy price for hijack deal: Analysts

NEW DELHI, Jan 2: India's ruling Hindu nationalists could pay a heavy political price for freeing three pro-Kashmiri Islamic militants to end the country's longest hijacking saga, analysts said Sunday, reports AFP.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP party had for decades prided itself as a hardened fighter against terrorism and criticised previous governments here for succumbing to terrorist blackmail.

But the abrupt release of the

jailed militants to secure the release of the 160 hostages aboard the hijacked Indian Airlines plane at Kandahar in Afghanistan has clearly robbed the party of its nationalist sheen.

"It is a serious setback for the BJP, because its leaders always projected themselves as those who could deal with terrorism with a firm hand," political analyst G.V.L. Narasimha Rao told AFP.

"The fact that even at the beginning of the crisis they put up

a brave front, claiming they would not yield to the hijackers, is all the more damaging to their image," Rao said.

"Whatever the compulsions, it's a setback. Vajpayee's standing has come down by a few notches."

The Indian opposition, still reeling under its shock defeat in September-October elections, has already fired its initial salvos at the government failure to stand up to terrorist pressures.

Even some of the released

hostages felt the government should not have released the three guerrillas, among whom was a Pakistani cleric who played a key role in fomenting Muslim separatism in Indian Kashmir.

Prime Minister Vajpayee, in an obvious attempt to limit the political damage, highlighted the fact that his government had succeeded in reducing the number of militant releases demanded by the hijackers from 36 to three after tough negotiations.

He also vowed to step up the battle against terrorism.

But analyst Rao said words would not protect Vajpayee from the political fallout of his decision.

"Tomorrow if militancy becomes more pronounced in Kashmir, the government will have itself to blame. The release of the three militants has sent a very, very wrong signal."

"It will be a morale booster to terrorism and a major loss of morale to the security forces."

Military and police officers - many of whom voted for the BJP because of its tough stance against terrorism - were unusually critical of the prisoner swap.



Devi Sharan Sharma (2nd L), captain of the hijacked Indian Airlines Airbus, gestures as he relates the ordeal to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee as other crew members look on during a function at Vajpayee's residence in New Delhi on Saturday.

-AFP photo

Rebels blow up gas pipeline in Gauhati

GAUHATI, Jan 2: Suspected separatist guerrillas Sunday blew up a crude oil pipeline using a land mine in India's remote northeast, police said, reports AP.

There were no casualties. "The explosion ripped apart at least 20 feet (six meters) of the pipeline leading to spillage of crude," said LN Tamuly, a top Assam state official.

No group claimed responsibility for the attack. But police blamed the United Liberation Front of Asom, or ULFA, for the blast in Sibsagar district, 380 kilometers (250 miles) east of Gauhati, the Assam state capital.

The pipeline was owned by state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation. It was expected to be repaired in a day or two, officials said.

Putin won't act hastily over Chechnya

MOSCOW, Jan 2: Vladimir Putin, catapulted into the Kremlin by Boris Yeltsin's shock resignation, said he had no intention of acting hastily to end Russia's military campaign in Chechnya after making a flying visit to the region, reports Reuters.

Fierce clashes meanwhile continued in outlying neighbourhoods of the Chechen capital, Grozny, on Sunday and both sides acknowledged losses in the fighting.

Russian troops donned gas masks, but none was physically affected by the chemicals, the agency said, quoting unnamed Russian military sources.

Putin made a vigorous start as Russia's acting president with the trip to the breakaway region on Saturday to wish his troops a happy new year.

"I think that everything we have done so far has been justified," Putin said on his return to Moscow from Chechnya, in remarks broadcast by Russian NTV and monitored by the BBC in London.

Three months into their campaign to crush Islamic militants, Russian troops have taken control of most of Chechen territory except Grozny and the rebels' mountain hideouts in the south.

"We have no intention to liberate anything by acting hastily," he said in other remarks carried by Russian radio station Echo Moskvy.

"We plan to act in the best possible way, which means as few losses as possible among our servicemen and no losses among the civilian population."

Putin, a tough-talking former spy, has won a cordial endorsement from US President Bill Clinton and other Western leaders for stressing Moscow's commitment to democratic values.

The 47-year-old Putin, who retains his post as prime minister, is keen to show he is firmly in control ahead of an expected March 26 presidential election.

"There will be no power vacuum, even for a moment. There has been no vacuum, nor will there be one," he told his countrymen in a New Year's Eve address before flying to Chechnya.



Acting Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) signs autographs to Russian soldiers after an awarding ceremony in Gudermes, 30 km east of Grozny on Saturday.

-AFP photo

N-plants in Japan free from Y2K bug problems

TOKYO, Jan 2: Computer malfunctions at Japanese nuclear power plants, possibly connected with the Y2K bug, have all been cleared up and did not affect safety or power generation, company spokesmen said today, reports Reuters.

Five different problems, most connected with data monitoring, emerged at four separate nuclear plants on Saturday, marred Japan's otherwise good performance in the millennium handover.

But all had been solved by evening, a trade ministry official said today, adding that there were no new reports of any trouble.

Power company officials said they were still looking into the causes.

"It is too early to say with certainty that this was Y2K-related," added a spokesman for Tokyo Electric Power Co Inc 9501.T (TEPCO), Japan's biggest power utility.

At TEPCO's Fukushima

Number 2 nuclear plant north of Tokyo, data on the position of the rods used to control nuclear reactions was not sent to the appropriate computer screen even though the data was present in the computer.

At no time was safety affected and the position of the rods was verified by other means until the problem was corrected on Saturday afternoon, the TEPCO spokesman said.

Investigations found that the computer had reset its date to February 2036. Technicians corrected the date and operations returned to normal.

The longest-running glitch was at the Shika nuclear power plant run by Hokuriku Electric Power Co 9505.T about 300 km (186 miles) northwest of Tokyo, where problems were reported with a system used to send data on radiation emission and the state of the power plant to company headquarters and the government in case of emergencies.

Ex-Beatle star Harrison leaves hospital

LONDON, Jan 2: Ex-Beatle George Harrison has left hospital two days after an intruder stabbed him in the chest at his mansion home, and is expected to make a complete recovery in a few weeks, Harefield Hospital announced here Sunday, reports AP.

The 56-year-old was deemed sufficiently recovered to return home Saturday night.

"Harefield Hospital can confirm that George Harrison has been discharged from hospital after being assessed as medically fit by a consultant thoracic surgeon," a hospital spokesman said.

Harrison was stabbed in the chest when he tackled the intruder at his home in Henley-on-Thames, west of London.

He suffered a one-inch (2.4 cm) stab wound to the chest, provoking a minor collapse of his right lung, as he struggled with the attacker.

Kumaratunga advised to seek treatment in US

COLOMBO, Jan 2: Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who escaped assassination in a suicide bombing, has been advised to seek further treatment in the US to restore vision in one eye, a press report said Sunday, reports AP.

Kumaratunga who returned home from London Thursday after treatment was told by doctors that it could be six months before she can open her right eye lid, the Sunday Island newspaper said in a report by its London correspondent.

"She indicated that she may seek further treatment in the US," the island said, adding, however, that experts at Moorfield hospital in London had given her the green light to resume her normal duties.

Kumaratunga, 54, in her first television interview since surviving the December 18 suicide bomb attack here, told the BBC she was likely to permanently lose the use of her right eye.

"Medically, (the doctors say) I can carry on, but probably I have lost the sight on this eye," she said pointing to her right eye that remained shut during the interview with BBC.

There had been speculation over the weekend here of President Kumaratunga leaving for Arizona for further treatment, but there was no official word from the authorities.

Police said that a woman suicide cadre of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) detonated explosives strapped to her body as Kumaratunga was about to get into her armoured limousine after addressing an election rally.

The blast killed 26 others and wounded 110 people who were at Kumaratunga's final election campaign rally held at Colombo's Town Hall grounds.

Kumaratunga, who was probably saved by her car, said she was the only leader who had "lived to tell the tale" after a LTTE suicide bombing.

Millennium triplets

COLOMBO, Jan 2: A 16-year-old Sri Lankan village girl became a historic mother when she gave birth to triplets soon after the new millennium dawned at Colombo's main maternity hospital, media sources here said today, reports Xinhua.

Doctors at the hospital have claimed that the teenage mother, Iresha Dirukshi, and her triplets, all girls, could be the world's first triplets of the third millennium.

They added that the young mother and her triplets were in good condition.

The triplets were born at 12:51, 12:52 and 12:53 am in the first hour of the third millennium. They weighed 2.05 Kg, 1.95 Kg and 1.9 Kg respectively, according to the doctors.

Media sources said Iresha and her 25-year-old labourer husband, Mahendra, who got married on January 13 last year, did not earn much but they were confident of being able to give the best to their millennium triplets.

Off the Record

Living exclusively online

DALLAS: In an effort to prove how weird the world has become, a 26-year-old former computer systems manager walked into an empty Dallas house on Saturday with a laptop computer and said he doesn't plan to leave until 2001, reports AP.

His plan: live exclusively online, including ordering food, furniture and clothes and hosting a 24-hour live video feed of his life.

"Our vision is that new online shoppers will go to our site to learn how to utilise e-commerce," said Mitch Maddox, who legally changed his name to DotComGuy and set up a company, DotComGuy Inc. for the stunt.

After locking himself inside the rented house Saturday, he added: "I'm going to come out being a lion."

The "live" part of the DotComGuy stunt involves 24-hour streaming video from dozens of digital cameras set up throughout the house. One camera points at the kitchen, several face the living room, and one even sits on a bathroom shelf-turned away from the toilet and bathtub. The project's Web site is www.DotComGuy.com.

The DotComGuy project has a few ground rules: Maddox can have visitors, but can't go farther than the back yard.

"We certainly don't recommend that people lock themselves away from the world, but we will prove that it can be done," said Len Critcher, a friend of Maddox's and president of DotComGuy Inc.

Maddox's first monthly paycheck from the company will be 24 dollars, but it will double every month as an incentive to stay in the house, Critcher said.

Critcher helped line up sponsors to sustain Maddox through the year, including Gateway, which donated the laptop, and Peapod.com, which agreed to keep the house stocked with groceries.

Dallas-based service 911.com, which offers computer advice online, jumped on board when it realised its company could benefit from a little live, online exposure.

"We are going to have people say, 'Hey, DotComGuy, how do I install a brand new modem or how do I get this or that Web site?'" said service911.com's Jeff Lipschultz. "And when he uses our site, that's how people will learn about us."

Saturday afternoon, the Web site video showed Maddox sitting on the floor of an empty room chatting online with visitors.

Among his first buys online: shampoo, toilet paper, cleaning supplies and carry-out food.

BRIEFLY

10 killed in Delhi fire: At least 10 people, including two women and six children, died in a fire at Khureli in east Delhi early yesterday morning. Xinhua reports from New Delhi.

Local police said that the fire broke out around 0200 local time in an electrical goods shop and spread quickly to an adjoining polythene sheets shop and then to the houses behind in which the victims were sleeping. The exact cause of the fire is not yet known and the incident is being investigated.

Ukrainian ship sinks: A Ukrainian cargo ship sank early Sunday in the Black Sea and at least some members of the 12-man crew survived, the Russian Emergency Situations Ministry reported. AP reports from Moscow.

A ministry rescue helicopter spotted two lifeboats in Russian waters near the site of the sinking, but it was unclear how many people were aboard, a duty officer in Moscow said. The Tiksi dry cargo ship, flying a Cambodian flag, was sailing between Nikolayev, Ukraine and Poti, Georgia. The ministry said that the cause of the sinking was unknown, but it may have been stormy weather. No other details were available.

Two die in Lankan blast: A bomb exploded in an auto-rickshaw in eastern town of Batticaloa Sunday, killing two people and wounding three others, police said, AP says from Colombo.

No one claimed responsibility for the blast, but police blamed the main Tamil separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Those killed were apparently taking the explosive to an intended target, but it went off on the way, a police officer said on condition of anonymity. Batticaloa, 220 kilometers (135 miles) east of Colombo, is under government control, but it is often targeted by Tamil rebels operating from their jungle hideouts.

Hijacked plane may have crashed at Lahore, says pilot

NEW DELHI, Jan 2: The Indian airliner that was hijacked earlier touched down at Amritsar, an Indian town close to the Pakistan border.

Saran also recalled how the plane, with 189 people on board, was hijacked.

"The plane was flying over Lucknow when the five hijackers stood up, one got into the cockpit and announced that the plane had been hijacked. Only one hijacker initially entered the cockpit and started giving commands."

"I could not hear any name but the person in the cockpit was called Chief. He was wearing a suit and a mask. The remaining four were also wearing masks and followed instructions issued by him."

"Initially, the passengers were not allowed to talk to each other... They never abused me. They were nice, cool... Neither did they misbehave with any of the airhostesses. Their attitude was okay."

"At times they terrorised (people) and at times they were

friendly. They even used to tell me stories and jokes. Actually, we were at their mercy."

The plane was flown to Dubai after Amritsar and Lahore and landed at Kandahar in Afghanistan on December 25. The passengers and crew were freed on Friday after New Delhi released three jailed pro-Kashmiri militants.

Before the eight-day ordeal ended, the hijackers killed a newly-wed Indian male passenger.

Hijackers' last words

NEW DELHI, Jan 2: "See you. We will be back soon," one of the hijackers of the Indian Airlines plane told stunned hostages at the end of the eight-day ordeal, newspapers reported Sunday, reports AP.

This is only the beginning of our war against the Indian government," The Hindustan Times newspaper quoted one of the five hijackers as having told some passengers on their release on Friday in Afghanistan.

Bug bites baby

SEOUL: Y2K computer glitches cut off heating and hot water in an apartment block and caused a hospital to record a newborn baby's age as 100, government officials said Sunday, reports AP.

About 900 apartments in Poyeonghoon, just south of Seoul, went without heat for several hours Saturday when a central heating system malfunctioned.

Technicians later fixed the problem, after switching the system to manual control.

In the nearby city of Ansan, a hospital said Sunday that its computer recorded a newborn's birthday as Jan 1, 1900 - instead of the correct Jan 1, 2000.

Another hospital in the city was forced to shut down equipment used to measure a patient's bone density because the machine could not register the year 2000.

Patients were not harmed in either case, hospital officials said.

All the reported Y2K problems in South Korea occurred in Kyonggi province surrounding Seoul. The region had been accused of neglecting Y2K preparations.

"These problems happened because technicians did not replace their outdated computer software," said Kim Sung-il, a Y2K troubleshooter at the provincial government.