

An oil-soaked penguin receives a wash at the animal hospital Phillip Island yesterday, after being caught up in oil spill when a ship illegally dumped oil off the Melbourne coast. The animal hospital staff were battling to save 46 penguins and said that terns and seagulls were also affected by the oil spill. - AFP photo

Oil slick hits penguins: wildlife officers Monday were trying to save more than 100 fairy penguins covered in thick black oil from a slick that washed up on an island off Australia's southeast corner, AP reports from Melbourne.

Ray Leivers, general manager of the Phillip Island Nature Park, said six penguins had died so far and another 110 were being treated at an animal hospital. The birds, named "fairy" penguins" because their stand only a few centimeters (inches) high, have been washed and placed in specially made woolen sweaters to stop them from preening their contaminated feathers and ingesting toxic oil.

Four Lebanese troops killed: Four more Lebanese soldiers were killed Monday in clashes with Sunni Muslim rebels in the north of the country, a military officer said. AFP reports from Sir Denniyeh, Lebanon.

He said the four were killed when the army took the northern village of Kfarhabu, where the militants had re-grouped in the fourth day of fighting. The officer's name was not revealed. The deaths bring to nine the number of army troops killed since the outbreak of the hostilities on Friday. He said government troops had captured 45 rebels since then, adding that the bodies of four soldiers killed had been retrieved. Security sources said earlier Monday the rebels had seized Kfarhabu and taken some 100 residents hostage.

Clashes in Egypt leave 16 dead

SOHAG. Egypt, Jan 3: Up to 16 people were shot dead during clashes between Muslims and Coptic Christians in southern Egypt in one of the bloodiest sectarian incidents in the region in two decades, reports

Bishop Wissa of al-Balyana said early Monday that 16 people, all of them Copts, were killed Sunday in the village of Kosheh, although police said 10 people had died and did not specify how many of them were

Christian. The clashes in Kosheh, around 500 km south of Cairo. spread to the nearby town of Dar Es-Salam where chanting Muslims burned and smashed businesses owned by Copts, po-

lice told AFP. Sunday's flare-up followed

BANGKOK, Jan 3: At least 20

exiled students from Myanmar

have been arrested in Bangkok

after they sneaked out from a

Thai refugee camp, allegedly to

In previous years, small

numbers of Myanmar dissi-

dents have gathered on such oc-

casions to make peaceful

protests against the Myanmar

military regime outside the

country's embassy in Bangkok.

strict the movements and polit-

ical activities of the 3,000 stu-

dent exiles in Thailand after

five pro-democracy dissidents

stormed the Myanmar

Embassy on Oct 1-2, and took

The siege, which ended when

rebels safe passage to the

ISLAMABAD, Jan 3: Tradi-

tionally tense relations be-

tween arch rivals Pakistan and

India have plunged to a new low

following the hijacking of an

said Monday, reports AFP.

gers and crew held hostage.

The five hijackers, who

killed one of the passengers,

and the three released mili-

tants, however vanished from

Kandahar airport in southern

Afghanistan where the hijacked

plane had been held and their

Pakistan has denied mount-

whereabouts remain a mystery.

Myanmar border in return for

But Thai authorities now re-

Thai capital on Jan. 4.

the release of the captives, badly hurt Thai-Myanmar relations and led to a twomonth closure of their long land border.

clashes two days earlier when

three Copts were reported

wounded in fighting that offi-

cials said began with a finan-

cial dispute between a Christian

on both Kosheh and Dar Es-

Salam, around 10 km apart,

late Sunday but there were re-

ports of more shooting inci-

dents after the security clamp-

a statement received by AFP

Sunday that the situation was

"under control." It also gave a

toll of eight dead and several

called together representatives

of the two communities in

about a reconciliation.

20 Myanmar students

arrested in Bangkok

Kosheh in an attempt to bring

The interior ministry said in

Local authorities meanwhile

Authorities imposed curfews

and a Muslim merchant.

hold a political demonstration, Thailand has since been police said Monday, reports AP. rounding up student exiles into The students were arrested the Maneeloy holding center over the weekend, under suspinear the Thai-Myanmar border cion of planning to commemoin preparation for their rate the 52nd anniversary of planned resettlement in third the independence of Myanmar. also known as Burma, in the

The students at Maneelov are forbidden from leaving the camp without permission and organizing political protests outside the it, police said.

"They (the arrested students) had sneaked out in small groups since Christmas and they met up in Bangkok for a political purpose," said Police Col Pornchai Benjathikul, the superintendent of Bhak Thor Police Station in Ratchaburi

province The arrested students, now under investigation at a detention center in Bangkok, could Thailand agreed to give the face charges of illegal entry into Thailand and then face

deportation, he said.

India has 'clear evidence' of Pak involvement in hijacking

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: India has clear evidence Pakistan was involved in the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814. National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra said Sunday, reports

We have clear evidence to prove Pakistan's involvement ... the Pakistani establishment is certainly responsible for this. That is what I am saying."
Mishra told the private Star TV

'The behaviour of Pakistan from the first day when it said that India had stage-managed the hijacking and that an Indian intelligence agent with a particular seat number was travelling in the aircraft showed Pakistan's intentious."

Mishra said. "We have the names of all the hijackers who are Pakistani nationals and the list of militants they wanted to be released contained (a) majority of Pakistani nationals," he said.

"All evidence and intercepts

must "prove its innocence" by handing over the hijackers of the plane and the released militants to India. "If Pakistan is really innocent as it pretends to be, let it hand over the hijackers along

with the militants back to India

and prove its innocence.'

spokesman Venkaiah Naidu

we have suggest this. One such

intercept showed that one mili-

tant outfit in Kashmir asked

another in the state why it con-

instructions from Pakistan.

(The) Pakistani establishment

is definitely responsible for it."

ister Atal Behari Vajpayee's

BJP party earlier said Pakistan

'The other replied that we got

A spokesman for Prime Min-

demned the hijacking.

The five masked Muslim militants were last seen on Friday at Kandahar airport, Afghanistan, as they left the Indian Airlines jet they seized

on December 24. The eight-day hijack ended

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

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said Saturday that intelligence reports suggested the hijackers and the released militants were on their way to Quetta, capital of the Pakistani province of Baluchis-

> Hijackers received weapons in Afghanistan

Another report from France adds: The three French hostages among 160 people held on board an Indian Airlines plane for eight days said Sunday that the Muslim hijackers appeared to receive new weapons when the plane landed in Afghanistan.

"On the second day, they received new weapons, modern revolvers, because at the beginning they had old guns and a few grenades," Daniele Goepfert. 54; said at a press conference after arriving at Nice airport.

Goepfert, who was travelling with her 71-year-old husband Gaston, said the weapons appeared the day the aircraft landed in Kandahar. Afghanistan, which is under the control of the militant Islamic Taliban regime.

Francoise Jougla, 45, a doctor from southwest France, also said she saw evidence that new weapons had been brought into the plane after it arrived in Kandahar.

"I saw that crates had been brought up and I saw them reloading their revolvers, and then I was very scared. I thought I was living my last few hours, she said on French television.

The five hijackers were permitted by the Taliban authorities to leave as part of the agreement and India said Sunday it had evidence they were on their way to Pakistan.

17 killed in Kashmir market blast

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 3: A powerful bomb blast ripped through a crowded market in the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar today, killing 14 civilians and three Indian security personnel, officials said, re-

ports AFP. Another 20 people were injured in the explosion in the city's Batmaloo district, just two km from the downtown

Several security personnel were at the market buying vegetables when the bomb went off. The injured included a dozen members of the paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF) and Special Security Branch (SSB).

At the blast site, a truck and a van belonging to each outfit were destroyed. The SSB is a new unit meant to guard top politicians in Kashmir. The BSF mans the country's land border with Pakistan

The blast sparked panic in the morning crowd at the market, witnesses said.

The area was immediately cordoned off by security forces, as vendors helped to put the battered bodies on a truck to be

taken to a hospital. "People were wailing, some could not run because they were wounded," a labourer at the site told AFP.

No one claimed responsibil-

ity, but the police blamed Mus-lim militants fighting to end Indian rule in Kashmir for the

The vegetable market straddles a highway and lies sandwiched between an army and

Elsewhere, Muslim militants threw rocks at an army camp in Kashmir's Jammu region overnight Sunday, then shot dead one of the soldiers who

pute Kashmir's ownership.

Abdullah gets party backing | Police surround as successor to Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 3: Leaders of Malaysia's ruling party today gave their backing to Deputy Premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as successor to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and fixed party elections for May 11, reports AFP.

Khalil Yaakob, secretary general of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). said its Supreme Council wanted Mahathir renominated as party president and Abdullah nominated as deputy president, with both posts to be uncontested.

The Supreme Council unanimously agreed that the post of president and deputy president will be uncontested," Khalil, who is also information minister, told a press conference after the council meeting.

"This means that the nomination of (Mahathir) as president and (Abdullah) as deputy president will not be opposed." Mahathir, who chaired the four-hour meeting, said the council's deciston was not a directive but merely advice to

Khalil agreed. He said that when divisions submit nominations for both posts, the forms would only bear Mahathir's and Abdullah's names.

party divisions.

By tradition the UMNO president and deputy president are also prime minister and deputy premier. But the party deputy presidency has been vacant since Mahathir sacked Anwar Ibrahim as deputy premier in September 1998 and UMNO's Supreme Council expelled An-

Mahathir, 74, said after winning another term in the November general election that this would be his last one.

Last month, he said he expected UMNO to back Abdullah as his successor but Abdullah needs to be formally confirmed as party deputy president.

Abdullah, 60, told reporters he was "very thankful" for the

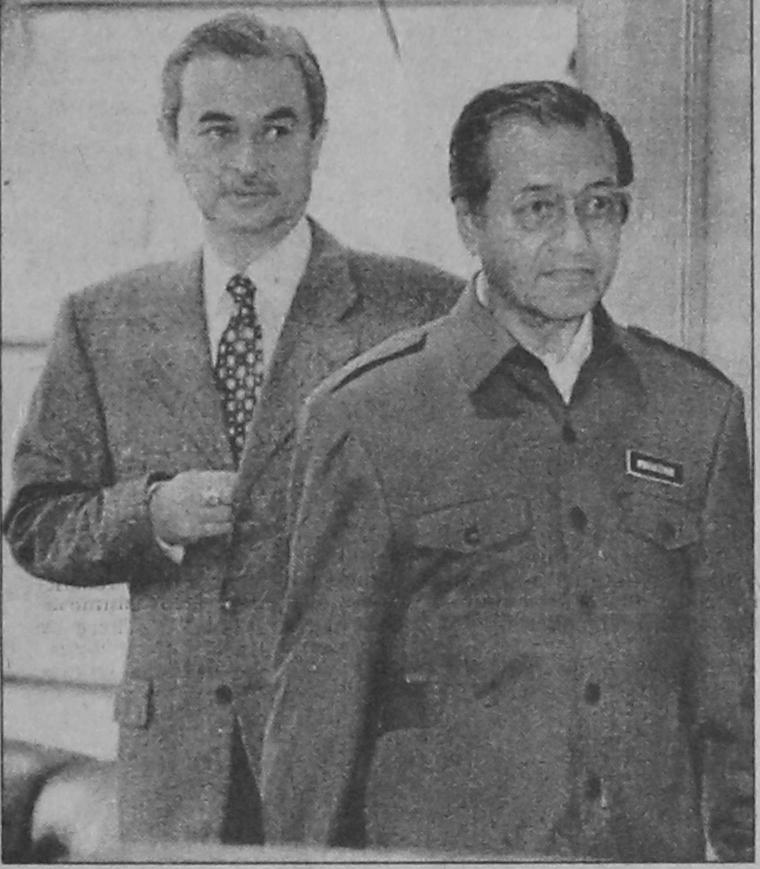
this year will vote on party leaders -- would be held on May This means there will be a lot of work," he joked.

Abdullah is now one of the three UMNO vice presidents and has been performing the functions of the deputy president since Anwar's fall from grace as heir apparent.

Mahathir said UMNO's annual general assembly -- which 11-13, with the elections on the 11th. He said elections for the

youth and women's wings would be held a day earlier.

UMNO dominates the National Front coalition which has ruled since independence in 1957.



Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (R) walks into the meeting room while being followed by Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi before the UMNO Supreme Council meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Malaysia's ruling party confirmed Deputy Premier Abdullah, as successor to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. - AFP photo.

Gen Wiranto rejects outside help for 3 troubled islands

JAKARTA, Jan 3: Indonesia's minister for security affairs General Wiranto has rejected offers of outside help in three of the country's main trouble spots -- the Maluku Islands, Aceh and Irian Jaya, reports

Wiranto, speaking during a brief New Year's trip to restive Irian Jaya with President Abdurrahman Wahld, was quoted by the Indonesian Observer on Monday as outlining a plan to "isolate" the population of the province.

The important thing is that the people of the territory should abide by the law. After that the next thing to do is to isolate them from, among other things, media reports, as they often fan the emotions of the people -- and intervention by other parties.

"If the isolation works well, rehabilitation and reconciliation could be carried out involving mediators acceptable to the headed the armed forces when East Timor voted for indepen-

dence from Indonesia. "Therefore others do not need

to give their support which could adversely create pros and cons, or even invite intervention from foreign sides," the Observer quoted Wiranto as say-

Several countries including Malaysia and the Netherlands have offered assistance in helping to solve the rising bloodshed in Irian Jaya, the Maluku islands and in Aceh in the far west of the country.

The Observer quoted Wahid, speaking on the same trip, as warning other countries not to assist Indonesian separatists.

"I warn other countries against (giving) any kind of support, such as sending weaponry to promote the establishment of a country within the Unitary State of Indonesia," the president said. Last week the national news

agency Antara quoted parliapeople," said Wiranto, who ment speaker Akbar Tanjung as of Indonesian strongman ruling out any deployment of Suharto in 1998 and last year's UN peacekeeping troops to re-

store peace between warring Muslims and Christians in the Malukus.

"I object to any call for the deployment of UN peacekeeping troops in Ambon (the capital of the Malukus) to avoid open war in the province. It reflects a lack of confidence in the Indonesian military and the national police.' A year of bloody conflict be-

tween Muslims and Christians in the Malukus has left 1,134 killed, over 2,300 injured, and more than 8,500 buildings, including more than 122 places of worship, either damaged or burned The military took control of

the province from the police last week in an effort to stem fresh waves of blood-letting. Strongly Islamic Aceh and

mainly Christian Irian Jaya are home to long-running separatist movements, which gained momentum after the fall East Timor independence vote.

residence of Pak diplomat in Nepal

KATMANDU, Jan 3: Police spent a second day Monday surrounding the home of a Pakistani diplomat whom they want to arrest on suspicion of running a fake currency racket, reports AP.

Asim Saboor, assistant secretary at the Pakistan embassy in Katmandu, locked himself in his apartment Sunday and refused to come out, saying he has diplomatic immunity, said a high-ranking police detective, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The detective said that police suspect Saboor sold 1,000 fake India 500-rupee (dlrs 11.50) bills to a woman undercover officer at a park in the capital on Sunday. The detective said that Saboor then took the agent home promising more money.

Officers following in a car, and tried to arrest Saboor as he arrived with the undercover agent. But he showed his diplomatic identity card and ran into the apartment. locking himself in and leaving the undercover agent outside.

The government is yet to decide on how to deal with the situation and whether Saboor is protected under diplomatic immunity conventions.

The Indian government has in recent weeks expressed concern about fake currency notes flooding the market from neighbouring Nepal. Many government utility companies have begun to refuse the highdenomination bills or insisted on people writing down their telephone numbers of them on them as a way of preventing

Lanka plans polls in March

COLOMBO, Jan 3: Sri Lanka's ruling People's Al liance coalition is planning to call parliamentary elections in March to build on President Chandrika Kumaratunga's presidential poll win, local press reports said today, reports

The Daily Mirror quoted senior government sources as saying that March 15 had been tentatively fixed as the date for the parliamentary polls. Elections had not been

scheduled until August. "We are now working to fix certain positive measures before dissolving parliament. The dissolution will be announced within a fortnight," the newspaper quoted a senior coalition official as saying.

D M Jayaratne, secretary general of the coalition said earlier the government was likely to hold early parliamentary elections.

Kumaratunga won the December 21 polls with just over 51 per cent of the vote, defeating her main rival opposition United National Party's Ranil Wickremesinghe, days after the was wounded in the eye in an assassination attempt in the capital Colombo.

The government has blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels for the suicide bomb blast that killed 26 people.

Chechens claim to take four villages MOSCOW, Jan 3: Chechen those villages, his own home-

forces on Monday recaptured four villages southwest of the capital Grozny from Russian control, a top rebel official told AFP by telephone from Chech-

The head of the Chechen government-in-exile backed by Moscow however quickly denied that one of those villages had been captured by the rebel

The rebel official, Movladi Udugov, said that Chechen fighters had expelled Russian troops from Alkhan-Khala, Alkhan-Yurt, Krasno-Partisanski and Kulary, some 10 kilometres (six miles) southwest of Grozny

"The four localities are under Chechen control, but clashes are continuing around Alkhan-Yurt and Kulary. Udugov said, underlining that Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev was in the area.

Between 140-200 federal troops had died and three Chechen guerillas were killed in the fighting, he added. No official confirmation or

denial could be obtained from the ministry of defence in Moscow where Monday is a public holiday.

But Malik Saidullayev, the Moscow-based leader of a Rus- 1) the eastern region of Gudermes

town of Alkhan-Yurt, remained under Russian control.

Russian forces "are still in Alkhan-Yurt" the 35-year-old Saidullayev said, saying he had spoken Monday by telephone with his brother in that village. The operation to recapture

the four localities was led by Chechen field commander Arbi Barayev, whom the Russians claimed to have killed in combat a few days ago, Udugov said. Fierce clashes continued Monday in several areas of Grozny, with the most violent

fighting in Khankala (east) and Chernorechiye (south), where the Chechens had recaptured some ground, according to the same source. Russian troops for the past 10 days have been trying to seize control of the Chechen capital Grozny, after sweeping

vading the cobel republic on October s also launched in the mountainan offer ous soul. ...ere the remaining

across the lowlands since in-

The last sustained Chechen counter-attack occurred in late November, when rebel forces launched a guerilla offensive in sian-backed rival Chechen gov- the second city, claiming to re-

rebel stroi, sholds are based.

HK parties call for full democracy

ernment, told AFP that one of take two towns.

HONG KONG, Jan 3: The three major political parties in Hong Kong Monday united in demands for full democracy by 2008, the earliest date possible under the 1997 handover framework, reports AFP.

The parties urged the Hong Kong government to start drawing up plans for a directly elected Legislative Council immediately amid debate over the best political system for the former British colony. The Democratic Alliance for

the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB), the Democratic Party and the Liberal Party said the government of Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa should open a democracy debate. It is the first time all three

parties have agreed on a date for democracy here. Tung has so far declined to

commit the Hong Kong government to full democracy But Tsang Yok-sing, chairman of the DAB, said in a radio broadcast Sunday that the ex-

isting system of government

was unworkable. "If there is one thing we can be certain about our present system of government, it is that the system is unsustainable." he

"No one can plausibly argue that the government can operate effectively under the present constitutional set-up."

He said elected legislators under the current system were unable to initiate government policy, and were largely restricted to opposing legislation. The system deterred talented

individuals from seeking careers in politics, he added. We are doomed to mediocracy -- government by the more effective.

mediocre," Tsang added. Tsang said in a separate radio interview his party was

seeking full democracy by 2008 but added there were other issues to consider. "I think there are a lot of questions we have to discuss besides the timetable for what you call full democratisation."

he said. Liberal Party chief James Tien Pei-chun said his party supported full democracy in

We say we will go along with that timeframe," Tien said on current affairs programme. Hong Kong's existing legislature is only partially elected by

the territory's population. At this year's polls, only 24 seats will be directly elected, with 30 picked by using "functional constituencies" representing business and labour sectors, and six more by an electoral committee.

That figure will change at elections in 2004, with 30 seats directly elected.

Under the Basic Law -- Hong Kong's mini-constitution drawn up by Britain and China prior to the handover -- the territory is allowed to decide in 2007 on the political system used for its 2008 polls.

The tri-partite push for democracy comes amid growing debate over Hong Kong's system of government, with some suggesting the territory's executive should switch to a "ministerial" Presently the government is

drawn from the ranks of the civil service but analysts have said a system of politically appointed ministers would be

Hijack leaves new strains in Indo-Pak ties

Indian Airlines plane, analysts Both sides traded accusations during the eight-day drama which ended peacefully on Friday, when India agreed to further widened," he said. exchange three pro-Kashmiri militants for the 160 passen-

Pakistan and India have fought two wars over the Himalayan state of Kashmir. Both claim and hold parts of the disputed territory, with their armies locked in a standoff in the mountains on the Line of

over Kashmir last year, during a 10-week conflict after Kashmiri militants allegedly infil-trated from the Pakistani side Indian-held part.

rested and tried.

vowing the hijackers will be ar-"The fallout of the hijacking episode will continue to haunt the South Asian region for a long time," said analyst Afzal

"What is even worse, the gulf of mistrust between the peoples of the two countries has been

Control separating them. The two newly-nuclear nations came to the brink of war

ing speculation that they may have already entered the counand took over mountains in the try undetected across the porous Afghan border heading for Pak-The region remains the most istani-controlled Kashmir.

intractable problem to resolve between the neighbours, with the military takeover in Pakistan marring prospects for any early resumption of stalled bilateral talks.

The hijacking drama has only rekindled the tensions. with the Indian government. under fire at home for releasing the jailed militants, accusing Islamabad of being behind the hijacking.

News Analysis

Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has angrily denied any Pakistani involvement and accused India of trying to malign it. In a statement after the hijacking, the foreign ministry

said: "We have no sympathy for such desperate acts without re-

perpetrators.

gard to the nationality of the

"We condemn terrorism unequivocally, be it state terrorism or individual acts of terror-

But Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra said Monday: "We have clear evidence to prove Pakistan's involvement ... the Pakistani establishment is certainly responsible for this. "We have the names of all the

hijackers who are Pakistani nationals and the list of militants they wanted to be released contained (a) majority of Pakistani nationals," he alleged. His Pakistani counterpart

Abdus Sattar, quoted in The

News, however accused India of

trying to cash in on the hijacking to win the "sympathies" of the United States. And he accused India of mishandling the whole affair saying New Delhi had never explained why the plane was allowed to leave the northern Indian city of Amritsar, its first stop after being hijacked on Christmas Eve on a flight from Nepal to New Delhi.

"One would have thought that now that the hijacking is over New Delhi would have learnt the appropriate lessons," The Nation daily said in an edito-"Alas, the blinkers which

dence," it said. The Muslim separatist drive in the Indian zone of Kashmir has left more than 25,000 peo-

ple dead since 1989.

Islamabad has denied Indian charges of being behind the militant campaign. But it extends open moral, political and diplomatic support to what it calls an indigenous Kashmiri struggle to achieve self-determination.



(R), greets West Timor Governor, Piet A Tallo (C) shortly after Tallo arrived at Komoro airport in Dili yesterday, with a delegation from the Indonesian airline Merpati. The delegation arrived to take the first steps in restoring scheduled airline service between East Timor and Indonesia. - AFP photo

emerged. More than 25,000 people have died in violence related to a Muslim separatist drive rag-ing since 1989 in the Himalayan Indian state of Kash-India accuses Pakistan of arming and training the militants. Islamabad denies the charge, but gives open diplo-matic support to the unrest. Both India and Pakistan dis-