

S Korean First Lady Lee Hee-Ho wins Pearl S Buck prize

SEOUL, Dec 25 : South Korean First Lady Lee Hee-Ho has been named woman of the year by Pearl S. Buck International (PSBI), a US-based welfare organisation for children and women, reports AFP.

PSBI focused on Madame Lee Hee-Ho's leadership in the ongoing effort to improve the quality of life for children, women and the physically challenged in Korea, the body said in a news release Monday.

It also described her as "a great partner" of President Kim Dae-Jung who received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo on December 10 for his initiatives to bring a fresh thaw on the Korean peninsula.

PSBI officials said the prize ceremony for Lee will be held in South Korea's presidential office on January 15.

Past recipients of the award include US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, they said.

Leading Thai PM candidate may quit campaign if found guilty

BANGKOK, Dec 25 : Leading prime ministerial candidate Thaksin Shinawatra today hinted he may quit the campaign trail if charges of corruption are upheld against him, reports AFP.

While campaigning in Bangkok, Thaksin told reporters: "I will accept what the decision is and will work behind the scenes if I can't hold the premiership position."

"Being prime minister is not as important as solving the country's problems," said Thaksin, who is leading the upstart Thai Rak Thai party into the January 6 national election against the ruling Democrats and a host of smaller parties.

Thaksin is being probed by the National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC) for concealing assets when he served as deputy prime minister in 1997.

Bangkok newspapers Friday said the committee investigating the charges had recommended Thaksin be indicted for violating disclosure rules, an offence which could earn him a five-year ban from politics.

The committee's recommendation is currently being heard by the NCCC.

But Thaksin could appeal an NCCC guilty decision through Thailand's Constitutional Court.

African male prostitutes fairly popular among gays, old women

BANGKOK, Dec 25 : African men are being transported to Thailand to work in the capital's commercial sex industry, reports and AFP correspondents said today.

African male prostitutes have become "fairly popular among gays and wild older women," the Nation daily said, quoting a Thai man who frequently purchases the Africans' services.

Transported to Thailand from Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and the Sudan, the men enter Thailand on a tourist visa and overstay their limit to work illegally in the sex industry along Bangkok's main Sukhumvit road, the Nation said.

The sex workers wink at potential customers as a signal of their availability, it said, adding they charge from 2,000 to 6,000 baht (48 to 143 dollars).

Mayor found dead in northern Colombian town

BOGOTA, Dec 25 : The mayor of the northern Colombian town of Tenerife, Orlando Sandoval, was shot dead by an unidentified group, the local police said Sunday, reports AFP.

Sandoval's body was found Sunday in a lay-by on a highway outside the town, according to police colonel Jacinto Mendoza. He had been shot dead the previous day, Mendoza said.

According to the authorities, the area in which the murder took place is one where leftist guerrilla commandos vie for control with right-wing paramilitaries, and mayors are targeted when suspected of having aided one or other side.

Chinese flock to churches

BEIJING, Dec 25 : Chinese Christians, both third-generation believers and the newly converted, flocked to China's official and underground churches to celebrate Christmas Sunday and Monday, reports AFP.

"Religion is very important to me. It's more important than life. Jesus gave us our lives," said Zhang Jinlian, a 34-year-old farmer who travelled for two hours from Beijing's suburbs to attend Mass at the Nantang Catholic Church in central Beijing.

Zhang, whose village had not have a proper church, came to Beijing with five fellow villagers.

Pope devotes Xmas prayer to ME peace

VATICAN CITY, Dec 25 : Pope John Paul II prayed at the Christmas Eve mass on Saint Peter's Square for peace in the Middle East, telling Christian communities there the Church shared their anxiety over the region's destiny, reports AFP.

"I think with concern of the Holy Places, and especially of the town of Bethlehem where sadly, because of the troubled political situation, the evocative rites of Christmas cannot be celebrated with their usual solemnity," the pontiff said at the midnight mass.

"Tonight I would like the Christian communities in those places to feel that the whole Church is very close to them," he added. "We share your anxiety for the destiny of the entire region of the Middle East."

At the same time, in the West Bank town of Bethlehem -- where Christ is believed to have been born 2000 years ago -- another mass was celebrated by the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, who is of Palestinian origin.

Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat attended the service in Saint Catherine's church, as he has every year since the authority assumed control of Bethlehem in 1995.

But other ceremonies in the town, where fierce Israeli-Palestinian clashes have broken out in the past 12 weeks, were sharply scaled back by authorities in solidarity with victims of the Palestinian uprising they call the Intifada.

Since the Intifada began on September 28, more than 350 people have died in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel, mostly Palestinians.

On Saint Peter's Square, John Paul II evoked his historic trip in March to the region, during which he visited the site revered by Christians as the birthplace of Jesus.

"With deep emotion I think back to the days of my Jubilee pilgrimage in the Holy Land," he said. "My thoughts return to the stable, where I was given the grace to pause in prayer."

"In spirit, I embrace the blessed land that saw the blossoming of imperishable joy for the world."

The pontiff said what he called "a particularly intense prayer" for peace in the region, quoting at the end from the Bible's book of Luke.

"May the Lord hear our plea! From this square, the centre of the Catholic world, let the angels' proclamation to the shepherds ring out once more with new strength: 'Glory to God in the highest heavens and peace on earth to those whom he loves.'"

"Our confidence cannot be shaken, nor can our wonder at what we are celebrating ever fade," the pontiff said.

The 80-year-old pope, who suffers from Parkinson's disease, appeared tired at the end of the church's Jubilee 2000 year of celebrations, which he is to officially close on January 6.

A heating system protected him from cold during the mass, held this year in the square in part to allow more pilgrims to attend.

But Vatican official Pior Marini said Friday that it is also easier and more comfortable for the pontiff, who now walks with the help of a cane, to give the blessing from the more accessible square.

The ceremony was broadcast by television to at least 40 countries and could also be accessed on the Internet.

Prayers were read in different languages or dialects, including one in Swahili.

A dozen children from Australia, Congo, Guatemala, India, Italy, Mexico, his native Poland, and South Korea offered bouquets of flowers to the pontiff.

On Monday, the Vatican state secretary, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, will replace John Paul II for Christmas mass on the square.

The pontiff, who has followed doctors' advice for the past six years to reduce his efforts, will nevertheless return to give his traditional Urbi et Orbi blessing to Rome and the world.

Saddam's son Uday says

Political reforms imminent in Iraq

BAGHDAD, Dec 25 : Saddam Hussein's eldest son Uday said on Sunday that Iraq would soon experience political reforms in line with promises made by his father before the Gulf War, reports AFP.

"Iraq, having reached a certain level of maturity and completed necessary preparations, is at a threshold, and I personally think it's time for greater opening," Uday Hussein told reporters in parliament, which he attended for the first time as a deputy.

Uday said the next step would be "an opening that responds to our people's aspirations while conforming to our traditions, heritage and tribal origins."

He said his father had promised in a 1991 speech to allow more political parties and more "democratic liberties," but that the situation after the Gulf war that year "prevented us from putting in place" such reforms.

The Iraqi government passed a law in 1991 authorising parties

other than the ruling Baath, but in the 10 years since no other parties have appeared.

Uday said the current session of parliament, which opened in April, would make good on Saddam's decade-old promises.

Uday also called for dialogue between Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, two states which Baghdad regularly denounces for helping the United States and Britain enforce no-fly zones on Iraq.

"It's important for a dialogue to be able to take place. There are differences among brothers but we don't want them to reach the point of no return," he said.

Uday, 36, became a deputy in March after officially winning 99.99 per cent of the vote in the fifth district of Baghdad.

He was seriously wounded in the legs in a 1996 attack in Baghdad, which he blamed on Iran.

He recovered the use of his legs after several months of hospitalization and surgery.

Serbia's reformists face tough job

BELGRADE, Dec 25 : As the last results from Serbia's parliamentary poll trickle in confirming the massive victory of democratic reformers, the new authorities looked ahead today to the tough job of rebuilding after more than a decade of autocratic rule by Slobodan Milosevic, reports AFP.

The Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), backing Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica, won a watershed victory in Saturday's vote for Serbia's assembly, finishing the purge of Milosevic loyalists it started in September's federal elections.

The electoral commission said early Monday that the 91 per cent of ballots so far counted showed the 18-party DOS will have 176 deputies in the 250-seat assembly for the larger of Yugoslavia's two republics.

By contrast, the crushing defeat of Milosevic's Socialist party became official, with the party that ruled Yugoslavia for a ruinous decade garnering just 13.5 per cent of the votes, giving it 37 seats.

But a persistent nationalist trend noted by Western officials was borne out by the 37 seats won by the ultra-nationalist parties, one of them founded by slain paramilitary warlord Arkan.

Saturday's elections were a key test for the DOS, which ousted Milosevic from the federal presidency in September's polls and October's follow-up uprising, but which had to finish the job by sweeping

Milosevic allies from Serbia's parliament.

The latest results only leave close Milosevic ally Milan Milutinovic as Serbia's isolated president, with a mandate not due to expire until December 2002.

DOS leader Zoran Djindjic, set to head the new parliament, has hinted the DOS will put pressure on him to step down before that.

Djindjic said Serbia's first government not dominated by Milosevic allies would be formed by mid-January.

"Our goal is to return Serbia's economy and living standards back to the world as we have already done in the political and diplomatic field," he said.

Djindjic added that almost all the members of his future cabinet "have already been decided".

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is dominated by Serbia and its junior partner Montenegro.

DOS sources said that one of the main candidates for the post of interior minister, who would control the 100,000-strong Serbian police force, might go to Gradimir Nalic, a non-partisan human rights lawyer.

In a recent interview, Nalic said his two priorities would be to transform the police into a "service for the people, and not the regime," as well as to "bring to justice all those guilty of crime and corruption" during Milosevic's era.



Pope John Paul II celebrates the midnight Christmas Mass on Saint Peter's Square in Vatican City Sunday. "I think with concern of the Holy Places, and especially of the town of Bethlehem where sadly, because of the troubled political situation, the evocative rites of Christmas cannot be celebrated with their usual solemnity" said the pontiff at the midnight mass. --AFP photo

Rebel governor says Russia returning to dark days

MOSCOW, Dec 25 : A dissident Russian governor launched a blistering attack on President Vladimir Putin on Sunday, saying he was taking Russia back to the darkest days of Soviet rule, reports Reuters.

Nikolai Fyodorov assaulted Putin on all fronts for his first year in office and called his Chechnya campaign a disaster in a rare public attack by a serving governor.

"We are now on a receding wave taking us back in time," Fyodorov, governor of the central Chechnya region, told NTV's analytical Itogi programme.

"Some people might not realise it but we are returning to the 1950s or 30s," he said, referring to the time of mass communist repression under Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

"Instead of a democratic Russia over the last months we have been building a bureaucratic Russia. It is obvious that instead of a federative Russia, a strongly centralised Bolshevik Russia is being built," he said.

NTV is itself embroiled in a fight against what it says is Putin's drive to curb the press freedom and is usually shunned by pro-Kremlin politicians.

Putin has unveiled local leaders by embarking on a crusade to boost the Kremlin's dominant role in relations with Russia's 89

regions and republics. Fyodorov showed his colours earlier this month as the only one in the 178-strong upper chamber of parliament not to stand to the music of Stalin's Soviet-era anthem which Putin had pushed through parliament to become Russia's national tune.

Despite his apparent loneliness, Fyodorov told NTV that he hoped it would not be long before others rally to his cause and said that members of both houses of parliament "not only support me but say thank you to me for voicing ideas that they share."

Turning to Putin's 14-month-old military drive in rebel Chechnya, which was instrumental in winning him the hearts of many Russians, Fyodorov slammed the Kremlin chief's trust that the military could stamp out armed resistance to Moscow.

"The war in Chechnya is hopeless, with no end in sight. In essence, it is also criminal because it is partly a civil war. The anti-terrorist operation there was a complete disaster," he said.

Fyodorov said he was often asked why unlike most of his humbled colleagues he was not holding his fire now that the Kremlin had so much leverage against the regional leaders and Putin enjoyed wide public backing.

Christmas Mass in Gujarat under police protection

BOMBAY, Dec 25 : Christians in the western Indian state of Gujarat attended Christmas Mass under police protection as tensions over a plan to build a Hindu temple on a demolished church remained volatile, police said today, reports AFP.

K.N. Rao, superintendent of police said "elaborate security arrangements" were in place to maintain peace in the state of Gujarat.

"A round-the-clock watch is being kept outside 465 churches in the district of Surat. We are keeping an eye on all likely trouble-makers," Rao added.

Roman Catholic church priest Xavier Manjuran told AFP that "Christmas was peaceful" because of the strong police presence.

"But it was peace under the shadow of fear," he added, speaking in the Gujarat town of Rajpippa.

In an announcement timed to coincide with Christmas, Hindu fundamentalists unveiled plans to inaugurate a temple in the village of Halmodi, where a Protestant church was pulled down two years ago.

"Everyone has their eyes on this region. Human rights groups have sent teams to Halmodi. So have we. The place is swarming with police," said Manjuran.

"Local newspapers are fanning tension by indicating the inauguration could take place soon."

He said Christians living in Halmodi were "understandably worried."

"We do not know what they plan to do. They usually select areas where Christians and Hindus live in peace and then begin stirring up trouble."

There have been simmering tensions for two years in Gujarat, ruled by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party.

The state hit the headlines on Christmas Day, 1998 when activists from the Hindu Jagran Manch (Hindu Awakening Front) and other organisations allied to the BJP attacked churches returning from mass.

Sheba George of the voluntary organisation Sanchetna earlier told AFP that Hindu zealots were working to a "very well defined" agenda to "terrorise" Christians.

13 killed as taxi collides with truck in South Africa

UMTATA, South Africa, Dec 25 : Thirteen people, including a one-year-old baby, were killed instantly on Sunday when the minibus taxi they were travelling in collided head-on with a horse and trailer truck in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, news reports said, reports DPA.

That accident raised to 35 the death toll in the Kei area over the last 24 hours.

Twenty people, including six children aged between three and six years old died earlier on Sunday when the bus in which they were travelling plunged down a steep embankment on the notoriously dangerous Kei Cuttings pass near the city of East London. Of the 77 passengers, 55 were injured and doctors expected the death toll to rise because some were in critical condition.

According to police spokesperson Shannon Kirkhoff, the driver of the bus lost control of the vehicle while negotiating a bend on a steep incline, the SAPA news agency reported.

Sunday's accident happened about 20 metres from the site of a crash two months ago in which 19 people died and 47 were injured when a bus plunged down an embankment. In November, four people were killed and 66 injured when two busses collided.

In the latest accident, the driver of the trailer truck also lost control and hit the oncoming minibus taxi. All five passengers on the trailer, including the driver, who sustained serious injuries, were admitted to hospital.

The two other fatalities in the area involved pedestrians killed on the roads to the coastal resorts of Kei Mouth and Kidds beach.

The most recent spate of accidents brought the death toll on South African roads since December 1 to more than 570.

Japan fails in space test

TOKYO, Dec 25 : Tests in space on a huge communications dish expected to play a crucial role in the future of Japanese satellite engineering have failed, Japan's National Space Development Agency said today, reports AFP.

The dish, formally called a large-scale deployable reflector (LDREX), was launched into orbit by the Ariane-5 heavy rocket of the European Space Agency on December 20.

The 180-kilogram (396-pound) dish was designed to explore functions of a larger reflector to be carried aboard a future satellite, scheduled for launch in 2003, agency officials said.

"It has been confirmed later that the antenna itself was in a situation without unfolding itself," a statement said.

"We will study data in detail and try to find the cause of the matter."

But the dish, made up of seven hexagonal umbrellas, failed to unfold when it was activated in orbit, officials said. It would have spread in a diameter of about 10 metres (33 feet).

The larger reflector is expected to consist of 14 hexagonal umbrellas and will test communications with hand-held terminals

on the ground, officials said. It will gather technical data for the development of a super-fast Internet satellite, they added.

Film star Pauline Curley dead

LOS ANGELES, Dec 25 : Silent movie star Pauline Curley, who appeared in more than 40 films at the dawn of moving pictures, has died at 97, reports AP.

Curley starred opposite Douglas Fairbanks Sr in "Bound in Morocco" (1918) and appeared in silent Westerns in the 1910s and 1920s. Her best-known role was as Princess Irena in the 1917 film "The Fall of the Romanoffs."

She died December 16 of complications from pneumonia at St John's Hospital in Santa Monica, her son Martin Peach said Sunday.

Born in Holyoke, Massachusetts, on December 19, 1903, Curley began her acting career in stage productions when she was 7 and made her first film, "The Unbroken Road," at age 12.

Curley is survived by sons Martin and Kenneth Peach Jr daughter Pauline Reynolds seven grandchildren.



Saddam Hussein's eldest son Uday gives a speech during a Parliament meeting that he attended for the first time as a deputy in Baghdad on Sunday. Uday said that Iraq would soon experience a certain political opening in response to "the people's aspirations." --AFP

Barak debates Clinton's proposals with Cabinet

Israelis divided on latest peace plan: Poll

JERUSALEM, Dec 25 : Israeli caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Barak and members of his "peace cabinet" met overnight to study US President Bill Clinton's proposals for an elusive peace deal with the Palestinians, public radio reported today, reports AFP.

Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami, back from five days of talks in Washington aimed at forging a deal before Clinton leaves office in January, spoke of a "breakthrough" and recommended that Israel accept the peace plan, the radio said.

Ben Ami also said Arafat was in favour of the proposals, which cover some of the key issues at the heart of the conflict, including the holy city of Jerusalem and the return of Palestinian refugees.

But the radio said Barak had reservations, quoting him as saying that "Israel will not rush blindly on the path to peace."

The two sides are due to respond to the Clinton plan by Wednesday.

A spokesman for Barak had no immediate confirmation of the report of the meeting, which the radio said also involved Justice Minister Yossi Beilin, Barak's bureau chief Gila Sher and his security advisor Danny Yatom, national security chief Uzi Dayan and left-wing Meretz party leader Yossi Sarid.

Israeli press reports say the Clinton proposals involve Israel turning over control of Arab neigh-

bourhoods of occupied east Jerusalem to the Palestinians along with the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, known to Jews as Temple Mount.

In return, Palestinians would waive the right of return for refugees, with only a small number allowed back to Israel for family reunification.

In addition, Israel would withdraw from 95 per cent of the West Bank and 100 per cent of the Gaza Strip, territories the Jewish state has occupied along with east Jerusalem since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Meanwhile, Israelis are divided on the peace plan with the Palestinians proposed by US President Bill Clinton in a last-ditch bid to strike a deal before he leaves office next month, according to an opinion poll published today.

The survey published in the Yediot Aharonot said 48 per cent were opposed to the proposals which have been widely reported in the Israeli media and 43 per cent were in favour, while nine per cent were undecided.

The poll was conducted among 501 people and carried a margin of error of 4.5 per cent.

Israeli press reports say the Clinton proposals involve Israel turning over control of Arab neighbourhoods of occupied east Jerusalem to the Palestinians along with the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, known to Jews as Temple Mount.

Aide denies rumours of Estrada's resignation

MANILA, Dec 25 : Impeached President Joseph Estrada stayed out of the public eye today, as top aides were kept busy denying rumours that he plans to quit shortly over the release of potentially damning evidence at his corruption trial, reports AFP.

Estrada's official calendar was blank for Christmas Day and there was no official word on his whereabouts.

Government television said he was absent as one of his sons, Joseph Victor Ejercito, distributed gifts to poor families in the Estrada base of San Juan in suburban Manila. Press reports said Estrada had cancelled a visit to nearby Laguna province.

Television and radio stations played his taped Christmas message in which he urged "introspection" and prayed that Filipinos may "learn the virtue of love, not only during Christmas but every day."

The leader, looking somber, said "understanding binds our society. In unity, we will attain the strength and power to prevail over fear and weakness, and help us attain our foremost wish for

peace, prosperity and happiness."

Presidential son Joseph Victor Ejercito, speaking on government television, echoed his father's message and added: "Let us stop all these fault-finding."

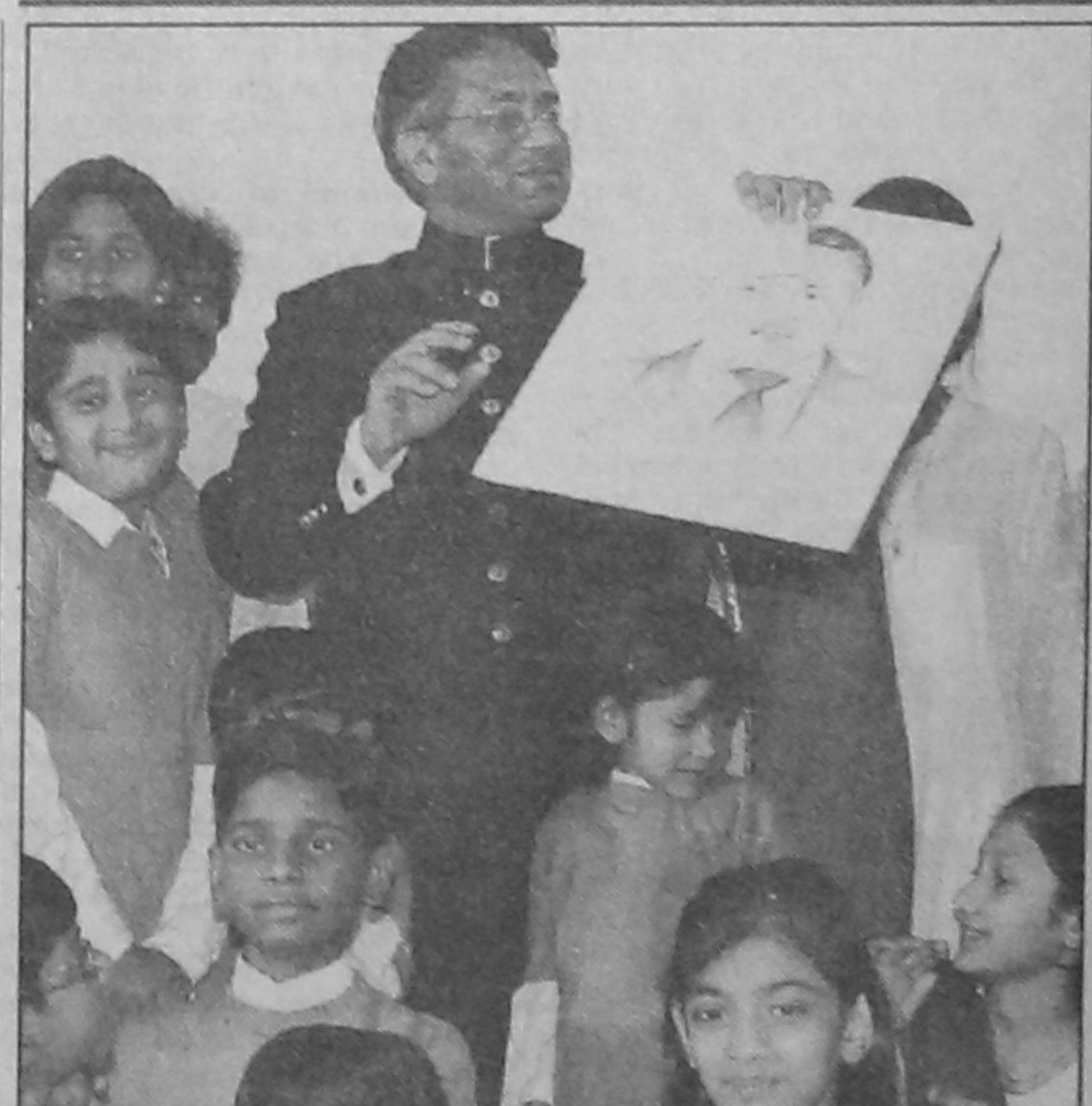
Estrada's chief of staff Ronaldo Zamora flatly rejected speculation that his boss was quitting.

"There is no such thing," Zamora said over DZMM radio. "I can tell you that that is wishful thinking by people who don't wish him well."

Presidential spokesman Ricardo Puno issued a statement branding the rumours as "totally untrue."

Telephone lines buzzed in Manila during the weekend amid rumors Estrada was contemplating resignation after a senior banker linked him to a 500 million-peso (10 million-dollar) secret trust account in testimony last Friday.

The Senate tribunal, sitting in judgement of Estrada's fitness to stay in office, has adjourned for the Christmas holidays. The trial resumes on January 2.



Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf photographed with school children while carrying his portrait during the inauguration of Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah (founder of Pakistan) Park, around Jinnah's Mausoleum on Sunday. The birth anniversary of Mohammad Ali Jinnah was celebrated around the country yesterday. --AFP photo