

Snowstorms hamper life in NE America

NEW YORK, Dec 31: A record snowstorm, the Northeast's first major winter storm in five years, dumped more than 60 centimetres of snow in central New Jersey, canceling hundreds of flights and slowing motorists to a crawl, reports AP.

Philadelphia declared a snow emergency, and New York sent National Guard troops to the southeast corner of the state. All of the New York City area's major airports were closed.

"It's too dangerous, people's lives are at stake," bus driver James McCain said after a harrowing trip into New York City from Montclair, New Jersey. He got stuck behind another skidding bus on the ramp into the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan and his 11 passengers got out and walked.

Others chose to see the brighter side. "You don't hear a sound in the world," said Jeffrey Greene, 56, of Merion, Pennsylvania, as he walked two kilometres to his synagogue. "There's nothing quite like a walk in the morning with a new snow. The world seems so pure, so beautiful."

In many ways, it was a day best enjoyed by children. Seventy-five youngsters flocked to a small hill in Linwood, New Jersey to fly down on sleds and toboggans.

"Even though it's not that big of a hill, it's still pretty slippery," said 14-year-old Lisa Grossman.

As much as 62 centimetres of snow had fallen by mid-afternoon at Randolph in central New Jersey's Morris County, and more than a 15 centimetres accumulated in parts of eastern Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

New York City's Central Park had 30 centimetres by early afternoon, a record for the date, before the snowfall eased and started turning to slush. And Newark, New Jersey collected a record with 34 centimetres; Bridgeport, Connecticut, had a record 22 centimetres.

US President Bill Clinton, meanwhile, took measures to help insulate Americans coping with snow, ice and frigid temperatures from what he said may become the coldest winter in years releasing an additional \$300 million in emergency aid.

"None of us can control the weather. But all of us are responsible for how we respond and prepare for it," he said in his weekly radio address on Saturday. "With the actions I am taking, the federal government is fulfilling its responsibility."

The last big storm to hit the Northeast was on Jan 7, 1996, when 48 centimetres of snow fell on New York City. Last winter, the city got a mere 33 centimetres for the whole season.

The central East Coast escaped the expected brunt of Saturday's storm because it developed farther north and east than forecast. The morning sky

was clear in Washington and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, while snow extended from southern New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania to the southern tip of Maine.

Kara Grossman took a train from Watertown, Massachusetts, to Newark. "It was kind of scary looking out the windows," she said. "You couldn't see anything. It was all white. We thought we were in a cloud."

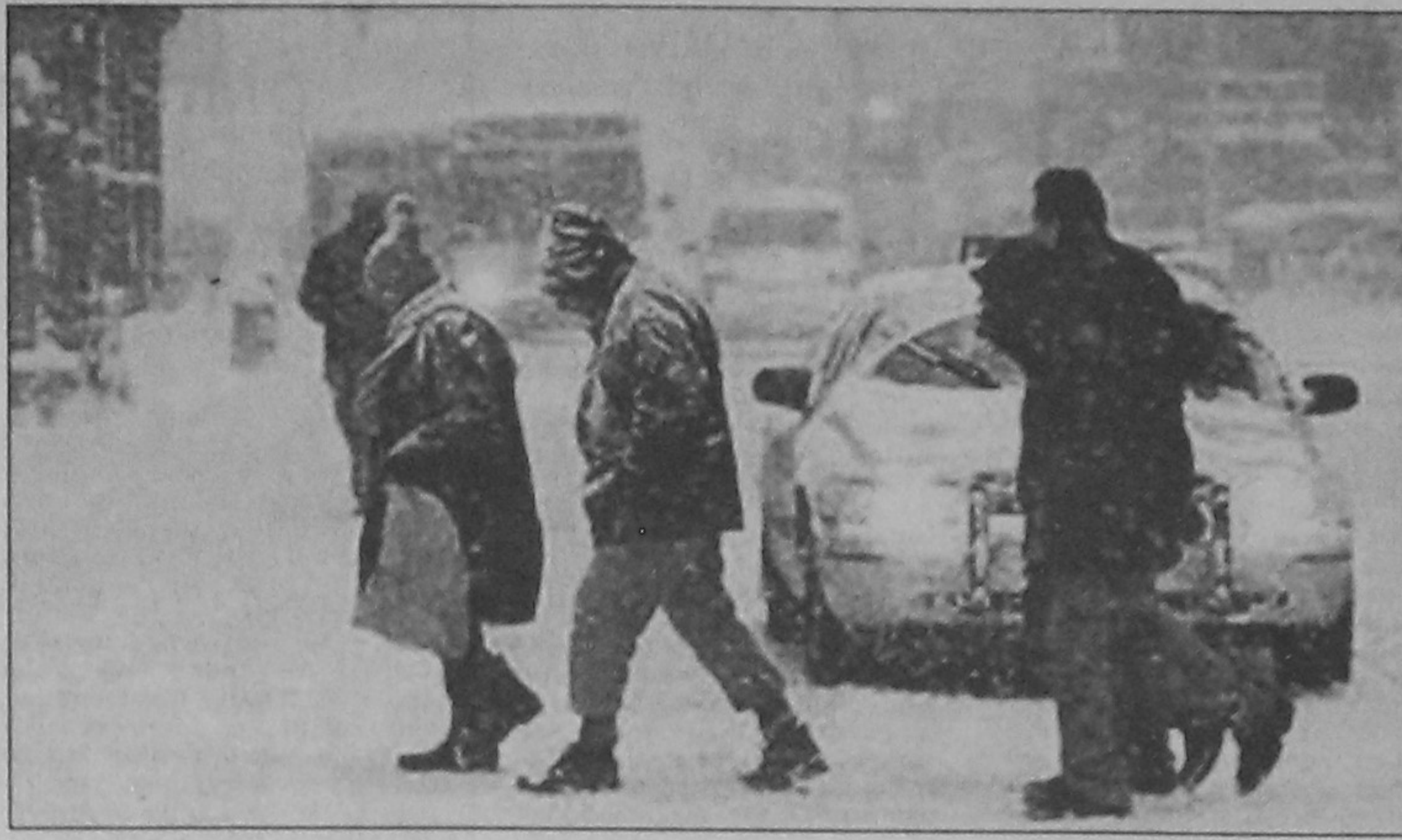
New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani discounted any speculation that the weather might cancel the New Year's Eve celebration in Times Square. "Although it's cold, it's not unbearable," he told reporters.

Philadelphia Mayor John Street declared a snow emergency, meaning only emergency vehicles were allowed downtown.

New York Gov. George Pataki activated 180 National Guard troops with 26 vehicles to help in southeastern New York.

"You can't see any of the runways, it's completely white" would-be traveler Kristin Foschi said from a terminal at New York's LaGuardia airport. "By the time a plow completes a circle, it's covered again. It's really quite entertaining."

Newlyweds Time and Tracy Scanlon of Morris Plains, New Jersey, were stuck at Newark International Airport because the snow grounded their flight to the Cayman Islands for their 10-day honeymoon.



Pedestrians brave the snowstorms on their way about town. (Internet photo)

Philadelphia's airports stayed open but airlines there reported delays and cancellations. Amtrak canceled Metroliner service between New York and Washington although most other trains kept running. New Jersey Transit suspended bus service in several counties and bus service in and out of the Port Authority in Manhattan was suspended.

Residents had plenty of warning that the storm would be formed by the combination of one weather system that had plattered the upper Midwest with snow and another that spread ice across the south-central states.

Highway and street crews were ready with hundreds of trucks and plows and people jammed stores as they stocked up on supplies.

Elsewhere, people across the South continued to deal with the aftermath of the storms that hit earlier in the week, killing at least 40 people. Electric workers fought bitter cold and ice for a fifth day as they struggled to restore power to tens of thousands of homes in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas.

Israeli army shoots Fatah leader to death

GAZA CITY, Dec 31: An official in Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement was shot dead today by the Israeli army, sources on both sides said, in a killing the Palestinians angrily denounced as "military terrorism", report agencies.

Thabet Thabet, a doctor who headed Fatah in the town of Tulkarem and was director general of the Palestinians' health ministry, was shot dead with five bullets to the chest at less than 300-metre range, sources close to Fatah said.

Israeli public radio said Israeli officials had confirmed their soldiers had killed Thabet.

The Kahanes' car was riddled with bullets as it travelled to Jerusalem from their home in Kfar Tapouakh settlement, near Nablus.

Their car overturned and crashed into a ditch. Thabet died at the scene and his wife, Talia, was pronounced dead at a Jerusalem hospital. Five of their children were also injured.

Israel has killed several leaders of Palestinian factions over the past few weeks, as a Palestinian intifada, or uprising, continues in the occupied territories.

"These Israeli crimes are proof of Israel's state terrorism," Palestinian cabinet secretary Ahmad Abdel Rahman said.

"The Palestinian Authority and Fatah promise the martyr Thabet they will continue the intifada until Israel's policy of military terrorism is defeated," he told AFP.

Top Arafat aide Nabil Abu Rudeina said Israel was responsible for "political murders."

"We hold the Israeli government responsible for continued attacks and murders, which are going to bring catastrophic reactions ... and destroy efforts to save the peace process," he said.

Some 2,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Ramallah, where Fatah's West Bank leader Marwan Barghouti told them that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak was personally responsible for the killing.

"Through this action, he has opened the gates of hell," he said.

Meanwhile Palestinian communication minister Imad Faluji said Sunday that killing Jewish settlers was "a Palestinian right" and called on settlers to leave before being killed.

"Killing settlers is a Palestinian right. It will never be safe for any settler on our Palestinian land," Faluji told reporters.

He called on settlers to leave "Palestine before leaving in caskets."

Faluji is a member of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction, but was formerly part of the militant movement Hamas and is considered sympathetic to the Islamists.



Police inspecting the site of the shooting at Kfar Tapouakh settlement, near Nablus. (Internet photo)

Gulf leaders urge Saddam to prove "peaceful intentions"

MANAMA, Dec 31: Arab leaders closed the 21st summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Bahrain today with a call for Iraq to prove its peaceful intentions towards the six GCC member states, reports AFP.

In their closing statement, the rulers invited the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to "prove its peaceful intentions towards its neighbours," especially Kuwait, which Baghdad occupied from August 1990 to February 1991.

Entitled "The case of Iraq and the consequences of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait," the final declaration called for a "comprehensive dialogue" between Iraq and the United Nations to examine all pending issues "with a view

to a lifting of sanctions" imposed on Iraq a decade ago.

The text also urged Baghdad to "respect the sovereignty and independence of Kuwait" and to apply UN Security Council resolutions, notably concerning arms control and "Kuwaiti citizens and nationals of other countries who are either prisoners-of-war or disappeared" during the Iraqi occupation.

Kuwait said 600 of its citizens and nationals of other countries disappeared during the seven-month-long Iraqi occupation. Iraq acknowledged that it held prisoners from this period but said it has lost track of their whereabouts.

Iraq continues to block a UN arms inspection team from

searching weapons facilities, despite a 1999 UN offer to end sanctions if the country permits the resumption of inspections.

And Baghdad regularly denounces Kuwait and Saudi Arabia for serving as a base for US and British warplanes that enforce a no-fly zone on southern Iraq.

The GCC leaders also expressed readiness to take part in any humanitarian initiative aimed at easing the "suffering of the brotherly Iraqi people" and to "work for the end of these sufferings in the framework of the UN resolutions."

They added the "need to respect Iraq's independence and its territorial integrity" and "their opposition to any interference in its internal matters."

Black voters' challenge for Bush

Statistics concerning the voting patterns of black voters in the United States look set to test President-elect George W Bush's boast to be a leader who can unite the country, report agencies.

Nine out of 10 blacks voted for Al Gore, according to an opinion poll carried out just after the US Supreme Court settled the election.

Only per cent of blacks believe that Bush won fairly. Thirty-nine per cent think he won on a technicality, and 50 per cent are convinced he stole the election.

Many subscribe to the view of Benny Thompson, an African-American congressman from Mississippi. At a post-election rally in Miami, Thompson said that the electoral irregularities in Florida were reminiscent of the old, racist Deep South.

Bush's choices of General Colin Powell, as Secretary of State, and Condoleezza Rice, as National Security Advisor, have done nothing to soothe the African-American fears.

As he accepted his nomination, General Powell said he was proud to have become the first black man to hold such an important office, but some members of the House of Representatives black caucus describe the appointments as tokenism.

Al C Hastings, a congressman

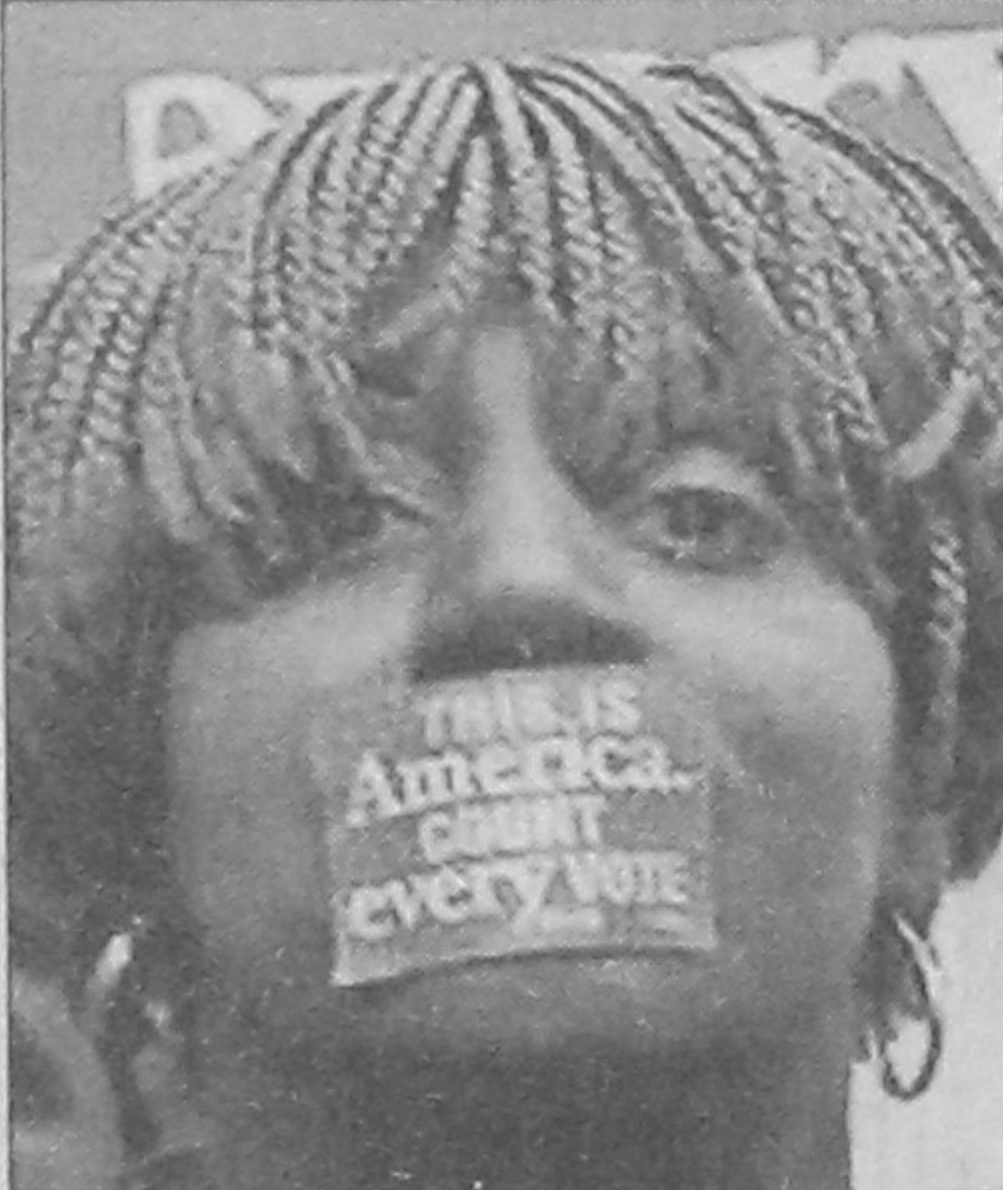
from south Florida, said they didn't translate to 'Annie May', the average black woman. He said Bush could only succeed if he did twice as much for African-

Unemployment may be at an all-time low nationwide, but, in some of Miami's black ghettos, the jobless rate is 70 per cent.

Bush could improve his ratings with African-Americans if his administration can ensure that there will be no repeat of the voting irregularities that have re-opened the nation's racial divide. But, if he is serious about implementing the more controversial elements of his manifesto such as the \$1.3 trillion tax cut and social security reform, the president-elect will need to split the opposition and attract votes from conservative, white Democrats in Congress.

Bush is under pressure from hard-line Republicans to fulfill his campaign promises, but the price of doing so will be to further alienate African-Americans.

The manner of Bush's victory most probably means that he will never manage to win over a community which feels so badly cheated. After the chaos in Florida, the new administration is obliged to ensure that every vote really does count in the future, and Bush knows that right now nine out of 10 blacks are hoping that the voting systems will work properly in 2004 so that they can send him straight back to Texas.



Many an African-American feel that they have been disenfranchised in Florida. (Internet photo)

Americans as Bill Clinton, who is perceived as having done more for minorities than any other president.

That would mean helping black communities to share in America's unprecedented prosperity and to address their concerns over jobs, education and housing.

Norway to revive peace bid for Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Dec 31: Norway is making fresh bid to revive a shaky peace process in Sri Lanka, reports here said today as the military claimed further territorial gains in a new offensive against Tiger rebels, reports AFP.

Norway's special envoy, Erik Solheim, was due to make new suggestions to break the impasse, including the establishment of an international panel to monitor a truce, the Sunday Leader newspaper said.

The peace process was deadlocked over the question of "de-escalating" the conflict, which has claimed over 60,000 lives in the past two decades.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas and the Colombo government have said they were willing to enter "unconditional" talks, but the rebels maintain that de-escalation is a prerequisite.

The LTTE mounted pressure on the Colombo government by declaring a unilateral one-month truce from Christmas Day, asking the international community to push Sri Lanka into reciprocating it.

Instead of holding its fire, the military mounted a major offensive on the sixth day of the ceasefire, claiming the recapture of a strategic bridge in the Jaffna peninsula.

The Sunday Leader newspaper said Norway's Solheim is to undertake another visit to Sri Lanka with a set of new proposals

on breaking the stalemate.

It quoted "western diplomatic sources" as saying that Oslo had suggested setting up an international committee to monitor the preliminary phase of a "de-escalation" process.

"It is learnt that Norway, in consultation with some other nations displaying a keen interest and concern over resolving the Sri Lankan conflict, has evolved a three-tiered plan, which would be made available to the Sri Lankan government for its consideration and possible approval," the Leader said.

Further press reports said under Norway's fresh initiative, the Tigers were to halt attacks in Sinhalese-majority areas while the government would have to lift an economic embargo on areas held by the rebels before opening talks.

Colombo reported that its military offensive launched just before the LTTE's ceasefire went into effect on Christmas Day claimed the lives of more than 150 Tiger rebels for the loss of 25 soldiers.

Following fresh action on Saturday, defence ministry spokesman Sanath Karunaratne said troops have now taken two areas of more than 50 square kilometres (19 square miles) at Thanankilappu and Ariyalai.

"There wasn't much resistance and we are now in the process of consolidating and clearing the areas," Karunaratne said Sunday.

500 weavers make world's largest carpet

TEHRAN, Dec 31: A team of 500 Iranian weavers has created what is reportedly the world's largest hand-made carpet, a 22-ton masterpiece valued at 5.3 million dollars, a newspaper said today, reports AFP.

The weavers took three years to fashion the gigantic work, which measures more than 5,000 square metres-- the equivalent of 25 tennis courts -- and is comprised of more than 1.7 billion knots, the Iran Daily said.

The carpet was sent Saturday to Oman, where it is destined for the Azam mosque in the capital of Muscat, the paper said.

Mori receives time capsule letter

TOKYO, Jan 1: Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori has received a letter sent 15 years ago by his predecessor, urging a Japanese leader in the 21st century to help bring worldwide peace, reports AFP.

In his New Year message, Mori said he had received the letter Wednesday placed by then prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone in a time capsule at Tsukuba University, north of Tokyo.

"In the letter, he expressed hope that a prime minister in the 21st century will help achieve peace and prosperity of the world," Mori said.

China looks forward to new century with hope, confidence

BEIJING, Dec 31: China, one of the world's oldest civilisations, is returning to the world stage in a giant man's pace after having experienced the ups and downs of the 20th century and will draw more attention with greater progress in a new century beginning tomorrow, reports Xinhua.

China was once a powerful country in the orient. Before the Rome Empire crumbled and the western civilisation entered a long night of darkness, the Chinese civilisation was at its height.

Westerners of the Medieval era were deeply impressed with Marco Polo's description of China being a great and proud nation where science was then highly developed, people led a prosperous life, knowledge was respected and management of state was orderly, which eventually prompted Vasco Da Gama (1469-1524), a Portuguese navigator, to set sail for the country.

However, the outcome was an unexpected catastrophe: the collision of civilisations ushered bruise-covered China in the 20th century.

Late Chinese historian Hu Sheng noted, "The 20th century is a century when China suffered the most in its history and is also a period of time when Chinese people began to make attempts in order to save China and prevent Chinese nation from extinction."

Hu also pointed out that it is also a century China is full of hope.

A major turn for the better in China's drive to rejuvenate the Chinese nation occurred in the 20th century. Marxism replaced Confucianism to become

the most powerful ideological force in China, and its application to China's actual situation helped the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

In the past 50 years, the Chinese nation, with a civilisation of 5,000 years, has once again risen in the world while the nation has achieved fantastic historical progress marked by sufficient grain supply to the nation, satellites orbiting in space, and Hong Kong and Macao's return to motherland.

The passing 20th century is an era featuring drastic accumulation of riches of mankind. China has drawn the attention of economists around the world with its fast economic progress. In the past 50 years, China's average annual economic growth speed is two times and a half of that of the world's average.

In 2000, China is expected to stand in the seventh place in the world in terms of gross economic volume and placed second in terms of foreign exchange reserves. Most of the Chinese people lead a better-off life and the 100-year dream of realising modernisation will soon become a reality.

China had been the world's No 1 strong economic nation for 14 centuries and continued to lead the world with its riches until the first half of 19th century. It is said that China's return into the world stage is an inevitable fact and China's takeoff in the new century will be even more splendid and fascinating.

The 20th century is a time featuring globalisation tendency. China has changed from a complacent,

conservative and isolated state into an open one. Following its foreseeable accession into the World Trade Organisation, the leading position of China, with a population of 1.3 billion, in the world's economic setup will eventually be established.

Having fostered economic and trade relations with 227 countries and regions in the world, China is placed second in the world for six running years in terms of the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI), and more than 200 out of the world's top 500 transnational corporations have settled down in China.

In opinion of Chinese economist Hu Angang, China has succeeded in a major cross-century choice.

The 20th century is an era of great changes for mankind, but the earth-shaking changes in China are the most impressive. China has made unique contributions to socialist movement. Under the banner of socialism, China, the world's third largest country in terms of territory, has not only won independence, but also successfully solved the problem of providing one fifth of the world's total population with enough to eat and wear. It has become stronger and stronger.

Foreign media comment that China's road serves world as a model. What happened in China this century are surely to affect the pattern of world in the new millennium.

In the 20th century, the mankind for the first time mastered the technologies to destroy itself, and created the form of world wars to push civilisation to the edge of extinction. China has on one hand

become one of the countries that suffered the most misery and most sacrifices, and on the other hand become one of the countries that have been fighting for its independence and sovereignty and making benefits for mankind.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the increasingly strong New China has upheld justice in the world affairs, advocated peace and development in the multi-polar world, and has therefore been considered by foreign media as the "factor of stability" and to "have changed the balance of force."

Ji Xianlin, a Chinese scholar of culture, said: "At this moment, a great number of bewildered people once again turn their eyes to the orient in a bid to find a way out in the old traditions featuring a harmony of the mankind and the nature, and human beings' care for culture."

China, which has been making efforts to put a brake on population growth, has taken sustainable development as a state policy, and treated perfection of the spiritual world as the highest pursuit, will draw more attention in the globe in the new century.

The new century will start a new page for the mankind. Some people predict that it will be an even complicated and confusing era, while others say it will be a time full of glory.

Many people expect that rising of China will once again bring the world with encouraging tidings. Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong said "Maybe a home for re-arrangement of the future of the mankind will be found in this fertile land that has nurtured the ancient Chinese civilisation."

Good Luck Charm



Kayoko Tani, a Tokyo's Sunshin International Aquarium employee, displaying a white snake that will be exhibited for the "Year of the Snake". The white snake, which represent the lucky symbol of fortune in Japan, will be displayed at the aquarium from today to drive away the slumped Japanese economy.

--AFP photo