

Bombings in Manila

Uneasy calm in Philippines as police look for clues

MANILA, Dec 31: The Philippine capital Manila awoke to an uneasy calm today, a day after a series of bomb explosions killed 14 people and injured more than 100, reports Reuters.

Traffic was light in the city of 12 million as residents avoided the usual New Year's Eve shopping ahead of the midnight revelry and feasting, one of the biggest celebrations of the year in the Roman Catholic nation and marked in the streets by gunfire and fire crackers.

Police said they still had no clues who was behind the five bomb explosions which rocked the city on Saturday. At least three people have been taken in for questioning but police superintendent Avelino Razon said there had been no breakthrough.

Opposition leaders said the bombings may have been the work of pro-government agents in a bid to force the declaration of an emergency or martial law and halt proceedings in the impeachment trial of President Joseph Estrada.

The trial, in which Estrada has

been charged with corruption and bribery, is going against the president, analysts have said. Proceedings resume on Tuesday after the holiday recess.

Asked if the attacks would force him to declare martial law, Estrada told reporters: "I don't believe so, not yet that's still far off."

He has declared a full alert and ordered the police and military to hunt down the assailants.

Four of the bombs went off almost simultaneously around noon (1000 BST) on Saturday. A fifth exploded some two hours later while it was being defused by bomb squad officers.

The most devastating explosion was in the front coach of a suburban train as it was pulling into an elevated station.

At least 11 people were killed and more than 60 injured. Other blasts were on a public bus and in an airport warehouse.

"The bombs have changed the nature of the political crisis," political analyst Alex Magno said in a television interview. "For three

months we have gone through this crisis without any violence."

The government has said the explosions might have been carried out by the Muslim rebel group, the Abu Sayyaf, or by communist guerrillas.

A brother of Abu Sayyaf leader Khadafy Janjalani was arrested in Manila earlier this week and police found drugs and weapons in his possession.

But communist groups have denied responsibility and many police officials have said Muslim rebels do not have the capability to mount such an assault. The Muslim rebel groups operate mostly in the south of the country.

"If not the (Muslim groups or the communists) then who?" columnist Rigoberto Tiglao said in the Philippine Daily Inquirer. "A group with military capability and training certainly. The masterminds could only be a cabal with access to such a group."

Communists blame Estrada for bombings

MANILA, Dec 31: The founder of the Philippine communist insurgent movement today blamed president Joseph Estrada for a rash of fatal bombings in Manila, saying they were aimed at diverting attention from the leader's corruption trial, reports AFP.

"Estrada has become so desperate ... that he is resorting to cowardly terror bombings in a futile bid to extricate himself from his infamy as a big thief," said Jose Maria Sison, leader of the underground communist party of the Philippines, from his self-exile in Utrecht, Netherlands.

Sison, whose 11,000-strong insurgent forces include a guerrilla army, said in a faxed statement received here that the bombings would also serve notice to the public that the government would "undertake repressive measures" to quell the protest movement against Estrada.

He was referring to five almost simultaneous bombings in public places in Manila on Saturday that claimed at least 14 lives and injured nearly 100 people.

US senators urge trial of Milosevic

BELGRADE, Dec 31: Two visiting US senators have urged authorities in Belgrade to try former strongman Slobodan Milosevic for war crimes in order to gain the country's international acceptance, Beta news agency reported today, reports AFP.

Republican Senators Arlen Specter and George Voinovich are the first US legislators to visit Yugoslavia since diplomatic relations between Belgrade and Washington were restored in November, one month after Milosevic's removal from power.

"Our delegation was informed that the Yugoslav authorities have many serious reasons to try Milosevic, and such a process could be launched as early as February or March," Beta quoted Specter as saying.

The senator from Pennsylvania added that the United States "wants to help Yugoslavia," but Milosevic "must face justice first," insisting that any indictment against him "must include war crimes charges."

"We need to see some effort here," said Voinovich, a senator from Ohio.

Milosevic, along with his four top aides, was indicted by the Hague-based International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for war crimes committed in Kosovo.



A Christmas tree rises in Moscow's Red Square. New Year's is the biggest holiday in Russia, followed by the Orthodox Christmas on Jan. 7. A statue of Ded Moroz (Grandfather Frost), the Russian Santa Claus, stands near the Christmas tree. --AP photo

Storms claim one in Spain

MADRID, Dec 31: Two people have been reported missing in the wake of storms and strong winds which lashed most of Spain on Saturday, which have already claimed one life and injured at least eight, police said.

The death was that of a 79-year-old woman, killed in Madrid when she was struck on the head by a piece of falling scaffolding.

A young windsurfer, initially reported missing in Los Alcazares near Murcia in the southeast of the country, made his own way back to shore after he was caught up in 100 kilometre-an-hour winds battering the coast.

But in the Pyrenees mountain range, rescuers searching for a hiker who was swept away by an avalanche on Mount Garmo Negro and a ski instructor who was reported missing after an avalanche at Port Aine, called off their operations without managing to locate the victims.

In the Mediterranean coastal town of Valencia, eight people were injured when the facade of a building that was being renovated collapsed.

Seven of the injured were admitted to hospital but were not considered to have life-threatening injuries, according to doctors.

Civil protection authorities broadcast alerts for 14 of Spain's 17 autonomous regions because of snow, rain, low temperatures and high winds.

With snow forecast above 700 metres authorities have warned people who are venturing out into affected areas only to do so by car, with snow chains and a mobile telephone.

Mexico frees 17 rebels

TUXTLA GUTIERREZ, Mexico, Dec 31: The Mexican government on Saturday freed 17 Zapatista rebels in the strife-torn state of Chiapas, complying with another condition set by rebels to resume peace talks stalled in 1996, reports Reuters.

"Today we take a significant step forward for peace," Chiapas Governor Pablo Salazar said at the ceremony outside the Cerro Hueco prison near Tuxtla Gutierrez.

The freeing of the rebels is another show of good faith by president Vicente Fox, who pledged at his Dec. 1 inauguration to strive for peace in Chiapas. On Dec 22 the Mexican army withdrew troops from a key posting in rebel territory.

The National Zapatista Liberation Army (EZLN) took up arms in 1994, to demand respect for the rights of Mexico's 10 million indigenous people.

NASA craft sees raging storms on Jupiter

PASADENA, California, Dec 31: NASA's Cassini spacecraft has swung through its closest approach to Jupiter, capturing dramatic movies of the birth and death of the fierce storms that rage across the planet's surface, reports Reuters.

The new images of thunderstorms swirling across the solar system's largest planet suggest that the massive storms, which can run for centuries, draw their energy from absorbing smaller systems, Andrew Ingersoll of the California Institute of Technology said.

Jupiter's famous Great Red Spot, visible with a telescope, is thought to be a 300-year-old thunderstorm packing 480-kph winds across an area three times as wide as Earth.

The new images captured by Cassini, which packs a camera with filters that allow it to peer deep into Jupiter's cloud cover, show what appear to be smaller, white storms being created, absorbed by larger systems around the Red Spot and then torn apart as they stray into a shear zone created by pressure differentials, Ingersoll said.

Previous observations from the U.S. space agency's Galileo spacecraft, orbiting Jupiter since 1995, have suggested that smaller thunderstorms draw their power from below the cloudy surface of the hot, gassy planet.

"The weather is different on Jupiter. You have a 300-year-old storm. We'd like to know why Jupiter's weather is so stable and Earth's is so transient," he said at a news conference at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

New and old colour photographs and movies of jovian weather are on the Web at <http://www.jpl.nasa.gov/pictures/jupiter>.

Galileo has surprised the National Aeronautics and Space Administration by remaining operational as long as it has. Scientists are also using data from it and Cassini to study how the solar wind of particles speeding away from the sun affects the huge magnetic region surrounding Jupiter.

"For the first time we have the opportunity to have a weather station in the solar wind," William Kurth of the University of Iowa said.

One immediate finding was that the huge bubble of charged particles known as Jupiter's magnetosphere is changing size more rapidly than expected.

Cassini hit Jupiter's magnetic boundary on Thursday, Kurth said, much farther out than anticipated, recording a burst of radio waves similar to the sonic boom created by a jet breaking the sound barrier.

Earlier this fall, Galileo had broken through Jupiter's magnetic boundary only to have the bubble collapse suddenly and unexpectedly back toward the planet, Kurth said.

Cassini, which passed within 9.7 million km of Jupiter on Saturday, has also collected evidence of a huge nebula of volcanic material surrounding the planet, materials said. Io, one of its four largest moons has specked this out, they said.

Cassini, one of the heaviest and most complex spacecraft ever launched, ran into some trouble in mid-December after registering unusual drag on one of the electric wheels that point the craft and its instruments.

The flight team was able to restart the so-called grinding wheel on Dec. 21 but have suspended operations that require turning the spacecraft to conserve fuel.

Cassini, launched in 1997, is bound for Saturn, where it is scheduled to swing into orbit inside the outermost ring and dispatch a European-built, parachute-equipped probe to the planet's largest moon, Titan.

Palestinian leaders seek Arab support

JERUSALEM, Dec 31: Palestinian leaders, facing pressure from militants who favour escalating an uprising against Israel, shuttle to neighbouring Arab countries today to discuss a US bid for a Middle East peace deal, reports Reuters.

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat arrived in Tunis for talks and planned to go on to Morocco for more discussions, while Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said he would visit Amman today for meetings with Jordanian officials.

Arafat's Fatah faction called on Saturday for an escalation in a three-month-old Intifada (uprising) to mark the 36th anniversary of the group's foundation and usher in 2001 as the year of Palestinian independence.

Seeking to sway a doubtful public, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak warned his people on Saturday they would face war if his hawkish rival Ariel Sharon won looming elections.

Palestinians are still weighing their response to plans put forward by US

President Bill Clinton last week that would reportedly give them sovereignty over the upper part of a key Jerusalem holy site and areas of Arab East Jerusalem.

In return they will accept a restriction on the right of return for refugees who fled or were forced to leave their homes in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, while Israel would maintain control over west Jerusalem and the lower part of the holy site.

Adding pressure on Palestinians, Israeli media reported that Clinton spoke with Arafat by telephone on Friday night to urge a Palestinian response to his proposal by Wednesday, less than three weeks before his term of office ends.

A Palestinian official said Palestinian delegates were due to hold talks in coming days with US officials in Washington, following failed talks between Israeli minister Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Palestinian parliament speaker Ahmed Korei.

Western diplomats warned of a stand-off between the Palestinians

and the United States over the details of the plan.

Palestinians want more information before accepting it as a blueprint for a deal, and say they will only give their verdict after receiving clarifications.

Meanwhile, a combative Barak said he would triumph over Ariel Sharon despite polls that suggest the Likud party leader would trounce him in a special February 6 prime ministerial ballot.

"I will win this election," Barak told Russian state television in a pre-recorded interview. "The real choice is Barak and war. I don't want to put Sharon off peace, but (it's) Barak or war."

Sharon has said that it elected he would seek a long-term peace deal with the Palestinians to be implemented over several years.

Death toll 309, 12 held Chinese govt apologises to families of fire victims

BEIJING, Dec 31: Officials in the Chinese city of Luoyang, where a Christmas night fire killed 309 people, have apologised to relatives of the victims and pledged to pay compensation to all the families, local media reported Saturday, reports AFP.

Luoyang's Vice Mayor Zhu Guangping admitted government workers had been negligent in their duties and also had mishandled the aftermath of the disaster.

"Some government workers had some obvious loopholes and errors in their work, causing harm to victims and their families," The Yangcheng Evening News reported Zhu saying to a group of bereaved relatives Thursday.

"On behalf of these workers, I apologise to everyone."

The gesture is unusual in China where officials rarely openly admit wrongdoing.

The fire at the Dongdu Commercial Center killed 309 people, most of them young people celebrating Christmas at a disco on the fourth floor of the building.

Zhu did not elaborate on the negligence by the government, but the building had been operating despite the government knowing for three years that it had fire hazards, according to local reports.

The China Daily on Saturday reported sources close to the fire

department saying the building was on the top of a blacklist of the most dangerous buildings in Henan province.

Most of the victims were trapped by thick black smoke on the fourth floor, which did not have enough exits, and the fifth floors, whose fire escape leading to the roof had been locked, local media said.

The fifth floor escape was finally broken open by firemen nearly two hours after the blaze began.

Many victims' families were also angry at the government restricting only one family member to view each body. Their dissatisfaction erupted into a protest by hundreds of people Thursday, which forced the city to then allow several family members to see each body.

The Henan provincial government has also handed a self-criticism letter to the central government, according to the China Daily.

Zhu said families of the dead, regardless of whether the deceased had worked, would receive compensation, but did not specify the amount.

Ordinary citizens and companies have donated some 2 million yuan (240,000 dollars) to a fund set up for victims' families, the China Daily said.

Anwar Ibrahim may face further charges

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 31: Malaysia's jailed ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim may be hauled back to court to face further sex charges, the country's new top prosecutor indicated Saturday, reports AFP.

"I will look into it when I come in. That will be next week. Okay," incoming attorney general Anum Mohamed Saaid told reporters when asked if prosecutors would continue with sodomy charges pending against Anwar.

Anum will take over on January 1 for a two-year term from Mohtar Abdullah, who oversaw the controversial prosecutions of Anwar.

Anwar's counsel Sankara Nair told AFP Anum's remark simply means prosecutors have not ruled out proceeding with further sex charges pending against Anwar, once heir apparent to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

"There are five remaining charges related to sexual offences. We are ready to defend our client (Anwar)," he said.

Mahathir sacked Anwar in September 1998 on grounds of immorality.

In April 1999 Anwar was jailed for

six years for abuse of power and in August this year was imprisoned for nine years for sodomy, with the sentences to run consecutively.

Anum praised Mohtar as leaving behind a "very credible and efficient chambers."

"Of course I will continue to have the assistance of Mohtar. He has assured me that anytime at all if I want to call on him to ask for assistance, I could have the assistance rendered to me," she said.

Anum, the country's first woman top prosecutor, was the former deputy chief executive of the Securities Commission, the stock market watchdog. The attorney general serves as public prosecutor and government legal adviser.

Anum, 54, has a law degree from the University of Singapore and a higher legal degree from a Belgian university. She worked for 26 years in the judicial and legal service before retiring from government service in 1996.