

Refugees burn 100 houses in West Timor

JAKARTA, Jan 3: East Timorese refugees have attacked a resettlement camp in Indonesian-ruled West Timor and burned more than 100 houses, according to reports reaching here today, reports AFP.

Hundreds of refugees, many from Tuapukan camp in Kupang, the main city in West Timor, attacked Poto resettlement camp 80 kilometres (50 miles) east of Kupang at the weekend, the Kompas daily newspaper said. At least 100 houses, mostly belonging to local Indonesians, were looted and burned, the daily said.

It added that several people, including the head of the settlement's technical operations, were injured.

The attack was prompted by rumours that refugees living in Poto had been attacked by locals following a dispute during a football match, said the head of the transmigration office in Kupang, Setyo Hadi.

The Poto resettlement is one of several built by Jakarta to house East Timorese refugees wanting to stay in Indonesia.

The camps usually include housing for the local surrounding population to promote integration.

In Poto, 176 houses were built for East Timorese refugees while 124 were allotted to local families.

Tension between Indonesians and the more than 100,000 East Timorese refugees in camps across West Timor periodically erupt into mass brawls. Scores of people were injured and houses torched last year.

More than 300,000 East Timorese fled into West Timor during an anti-independence campaign of terror, violence and destruction that followed East Timor's vote to break away from Indonesia in September 1999.

Many have since been repatriated but about 100,000 are still holed up in the squalid camps in West Timor.



Sila Maria Calderon (R) greets supporters during her swearing-in ceremony to become the new Governor of Puerto Rico on Tuesday, in front of the Puerto Rican Capitol building in San Juan. Calderon campaigned on a NO to US statehood campaign. Behind Calderon stand (L-R) Panama's President Mireya Moscoso, Dominican Republic's President Hipolito Mejias, and Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez. --AFP photo

Four killed in Aceh violence

BANDA ACEH, Jan 3: The latest clashes in Indonesia's restive Aceh province have left at least four people dead, police and rights activists said Wednesday, reports AP.

A bank clerk was shot dead when a group of unidentified gunmen attacked two cars carrying money for a state-run bank in northern Aceh on Tuesday, said local police chief Lt. Col. Wanto Sumardi.

On the same day, villagers found the bodies of three civilians in eastern Aceh, said Zulharnaini, a local human rights worker who like many Indonesians uses only one name.

He said the three were allegedly taken by police officers during a security crackdown on Sunday. Police denied knowledge of the three deaths.

Zulharnaini said a 13-year old boy was also injured by gunshots and seven villagers were arrested during another security operation on Tuesday.

The latest deaths brought to seven the number of people killed in violence in the region on the northern tip of Sumatra island this year. At least 900 people including 130 soldiers and police were killed last year in skirmishes between the rebel Free Aceh Movement and security forces, despite a cease-fire that went into effect in June.

The two sides are scheduled to meet on Jan. 8 in Switzerland to discuss extending the truce which expires on Jan. 15.

The rebels have been fighting for an independent homeland for 26 years. At least 6,000 people have been killed in the past decade.

Over 1,000 killed in Lankan fighting in three months

COLOMBO, Jan 3: A total of 1,045 Tamil Tiger rebels and troops have died in a series of offensives in the northern Jaffna peninsula over the past three months, the army has revealed, reports AFP.

Figures published in the state-run Daily News on Wednesday said 777 rebels were killed and 268 soldiers had died in military operations launched by the army since October.

In 10 army counter offensives, a total of 139 square kilometres (55 square miles) of territory was recaptured from rebels.

Besides suffering huge manpower losses, 246 guerrillas of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were injured, the report added.

The Tigers had seized the territory in a spectacular military offensive in April 2000, when they overran a number of Sri Lankan army bases.

But the army, boosted by the acquisition of modern weapons, halted the rebel offensive and slowly regained most of the territory including the 32-kilometre (20-mile) main highway on the peninsula.

The rebels still control about 25 kilometres (15 miles) of highway up to the strategic

Elephant Pass which connects the peninsula with the mainland, as well as the adjacent northern Wanni region.

Officials here said the army's strategy is to regain total control of Jaffna peninsula before attacking the rebels in their Wanni stronghold.

The offensives came despite efforts by Norway to kickstart peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, fighting for a separatist Tamil homeland.

The LTTE announced a month-long unilateral ceasefire on Christmas Day but the government refused to join in saying a ceasefire could be agreed upon if peace talks made "meaningful progress."

The army also argued that the LTTE had announced a ceasefire because it had been weakened by the offensives and wanted time to rebuild and retrain its cadres.

Norwegian peace envoy Eric Solheim is however expected to arrive soon in Colombo for a fresh round of negotiations on peace talks.

More than 55,000 people have been killed in the two decade conflict.

Afghan Taliban clash with opposition fighters

DUSHANBE, Jan 3: Afghan Taliban troops clashed Tuesday with opposition fighters in the country's north, near the Tajik border, Russian border guards reported, reports AFP.

Heavy artillery automatic arms fire were heard not far from the border posts at Moskovski and Piandj, some 250 kilometres (150 miles) south-east of the Tajik capital, the border guards' press agency reported Wednesday.

The former Soviet central Asian republic of Tajikistan supports the forces of opposition against the

Afghan Taliban regime. The two countries share a 1,500-kilometre (900-mile) border.

Dushanbe fears that the fighting in northeast Afghanistan will threaten its own security.

The opposition's main commander, ousted president Burhanuddin Rabbani's former defence minister Ahmad Shah Masood, is battling the

Taliban in northeastern Takhar province, with strongholds in neighbouring Badakshan and the Panjshir valley north of here.

Armed opposition groups are also planning more attacks in central

Afghanistan after capturing a key district of Bamyan province from the ruling Taliban militia, an opposition spokesman said Tuesday.

The puritanical Taliban Islamic militia drove Rabbani and Masood from Kabul in 1996 and now control most of the country.

Most of the Tajik-Afghan border is patrolled by 11,000 Russian guards under the terms of an agreement between Moscow and Dushanbe.

Tajikistan has become a major transit route for drugs exported from war-torn Afghanistan, the world's largest opium producer.

Two Malaysian opposition leaders face more charges

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 3: Two leaders of the opposition National Justice party were formally charged Wednesday with illegal assembly and rioting in connection with the party's win in a recent by-election in Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's home state, reports AP.

Ezam Mohamad Noor and Azmin Ali, members of the party's ruling council, were released on bail of 5,000 ringgit (dhs 1,315) each after appearing at court in Kulim, northern Malaysia.

Riot police kept watch over hundreds of opposition supporters in Kulim shouting anti-Mahathir slogans outside the courthouse. The crowd dispersed after police threatened to spray chemically laced water, witnesses said. At least one person was arrested.

"The police have again shown their harassment tactics," Ezam told the Associated Press by telephone. "We are disappointed that Mahathir has once more made use of the police."

Ezam and Azmin join seven other opposition figures, mostly from the Justice Party, charged with similar offenses over the past two weeks. If convicted, they face a maximum two years in prison. A trial date will be set Feb. 18.

The party, led by the wife of jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim, captured the Lunas district assembly seat Nov. 29 in Kedah state, dealing a high-profile blow to Mahathir's government.

The charges stem from opposition supporters blocking buses that they suspected were bringing in illegal voters to pad pro-government tallies on voting day. There was no violence.

Ezam said that the court case was aimed at deflecting attention from the ruling coalition's loss, which he said proved Mahathir was no longer able to rally the united support of the Malay Muslim ethnic majority.

Many voters turned away from Mahathir's long-ruling United Malays National Organization in general elections in November 1999, partly out of sympathy for Anwar, who was sacked as deputy premier in 1998 and is now serving 15 years in prison for corruption and sodomy.

Anwar and his supporters claim that the charges were orchestrated by Mahathir's government.

Chilean judge to interrogate Pinochet Jan 9

SANTIAGO, Jan 3: Critics of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet made another step Tuesday toward putting him on trial as a judge set his formal deposition for January 9, reports AFP.

The scheduled questioning will come immediately after two days of physical and psychological examinations on January 7 and 8 to determine Pinochet's fitness to stand trial.

The dates for the court-ordered medical tests were announced by a lawyer earlier Tuesday.

Judge Juan Guzman Tapia, who is leading the investigation into allegations of human rights abuses against the ex-dictator, will conduct the questioning, which could pave the way for his eventual trial.

Meanwhile, Chile's National Security Council met Tuesday, for the first time since President Ricardo Lagos took office in March 2000.

The council, created during Pinochet's 1973-1990 rule and made up of top military brass and the presidents of the Senate and Supreme Court, is tasked with advising the president in times of real or potential threats to national security.

The meeting broke up at 8:30 pm, with council members express-

ing support for Chile's government and judicial institutions and vowing to respect "different points of view on our recent history."

"In this spirit, members of the council expressed their support for the president of the Republic, encouraging him to seek formulas to consolidate reconciliation and unity," the council said in a statement.

Tuesday's NSC meeting was requested by Chile's top military leaders after Guzman, who is coordinating more than 200 lawsuits against Pinochet, accused the 85-year-old former leader of masterminding the "Caravan of Death," a military unit believed to have kidnapped and executed 75 political prisoners across Chile in October 1973, a month after the coup that swept Pinochet to power.

Participants insisted that Pinochet's legal woes were not a topic for discussion at the closed-door meeting.

About 500 demonstrators chanted "Put Pinochet on trial!" in a plaza across from the presidential palace as the meeting was underway inside.

On December 20, the Supreme Court ordered Pinochet to undergo mental and neurological exams to determine whether he was fit to

stand trial for human rights abuses that took place during his 17-year rule.

Pinochet attorneys have said their client, who suffers from diabetes and a series of cardiovascular diseases, is not up to the stress of trial.

On December 26, the Supreme Court postponed Pinochet's appearance before Guzman pending the medical tests.

Myanmar Govt denies killings in Thai border

YANGON, Jan 3: Myanmar's military government today denied its soldiers were responsible for the murder of six Thais, including two children, in a cross-border raid at the weekend, reports Reuters.

The Thais, members of two families, were shot dead on Saturday night by a group of eight heavily armed bandits in Suan Pueng, Thai military sources were quoted by Thai newspapers on Tuesday as saying the gunmen may have been members of the Myanmar army.