

Morales Thanks Castro

LA HABANA, Bolivia, Dec. 20--Evo Morales, the outspoken leftist who claimed victory in Bolivia's presidential election, praised President Fidel Castro in an interview with government television, AFP reported.

"I want to tell you that this year I dreamt of joining the anti-imperialist struggle of Fidel and the Cuban people," he said in a message to the Cuban people.

"Now I have the opportunity to be with him in this struggle, in search of peace with social justice," he said.

Morales praised the resilience of Cubans in resisting the decades-old US trade embargo against the island. "I hope the government of the United States lifts it some day."

"I want to tell the Cuban people, its government and its leaders: thank you, for showing how to govern, to Latin America and the rest of the world, and for defending its dig-



Evo Morales



Fidel Castro

nity and sovereignty. A special and revolutionary greeting to all the Cuban people," Morales said.

The 46-year-old former coca grower, who has pledged to be a thorn in Washington's side, is set to become the first indigenous head of South America's poorest country.

Exit polls gave Morales more than the 50 percent of the vote needed to win. His nearest rival, Bolivian former president Jorge Quiroga, conceded defeat late Sunday. Morales, who is set to

take office on January 22, said he was "very happy" because voters gave him more than half the votes, thus avoiding the presidential selection from being thrown to Congress, as mandated by the Bolivian constitution.

"The people know who I am and the dirty campaign (against me) did not work. Those who used to kill us with bullets and are now trying to kill us with lies have failed, because the people know what our movement is about," he said.

Ruling Basque Party Slams ETA

MADRID, Spain, Dec. 20--The ruling moderate Basque Nationalist Party in Spain's northern Basque region slammed armed separatist group ETA for continuing its "macabre" violence and criticized

the group's political mouthpiece for failing to disassociate itself from attacks, AFP reported.

"We call on ETA once again to cease its extortion and violence," PNV chairman Josu Jon Imaz said as his party noted a weekend blast at the premises of a Basque firm in the northern town of Iruia.

The blast, which caused material damage, followed a telephone warning to a local newspaper, the caller claiming to represent ETA.

Imaz said his party believed such "macabre" attacks "permanently deauthorize" the banned Batasuna as a valid mouthpiece for the group in the political process designed to end four decades of regional unrest.

The blast came less than two weeks after ETA set off six small bombs and caused the evacuation of Santander airport on the north coast on the

anniversary of the Spanish constitution after a warning suggested a grenade attack was imminent.

Four days later Spanish police said they had found two grenade-launchers near the airport runway.

On Sunday Imaz said Basque people were fed up with the "abyss" between the reality of continued attacks and expectations that peace would one day come to the region.

ETA has been blamed for more than 800 deaths since launching its movement in 1968 to win an independent Basque homeland straddling the Pyrenees in northern Spain and southwestern France.

Its last fatal attack came in May 2003 and a shoal of recent arrests of its top operators has left the group weakened although it has continued to pursue a low-intensity bombing campaign.

Australia Racism Alive

SYDNEY, Australia, Dec. 20--One in three Australians believe too many immigrants are allowed into the country and 16 percent oppose multiculturalism, according to a survey after the country's worst racial violence in decades, AFP reported.

But the large majority of citizens support a diversity of ethnic groups within Australian society, according to the Sydney Morning Herald poll.

The survey follows racial violence in which white mobs beat up people of Middle Eastern appearance on a Sydney beach on December 11, sparking retaliatory attacks in which cars, shops and churches were trashed.

Prime Minister John Howard said after the riots at Cronulla beach in southern Sydney: "I do not accept there is under-

lying racism in this country."

However, the Herald's ACNielsen poll found that 75 percent of respondents agreed with the statement: "There is an underlying racism in Australia."

Only 22 percent of the 1,400 people interviewed for the survey last week-end agreed with the prime minister. A further three percent were undecided.

The survey showed 81 percent of those polled supported multiculturalism, defined here as the presence of different ethnic groups in Australian society.

But 16 percent opposed multiculturalism while three percent had no view.

Thirty-three percent of respondents felt that current immigration intakes were "too high", but the Herald said this was down from 41 percent in 2001.

Speaking on commercial

television Tuesday, Howard said that while there were racial elements to the beach clashes, Australia was one of the most successful cultural melting pots in the world.

"Multiculturalism means different things to different people but in its lowest common denominator it means that people believe in diversity and are therefore tolerant of racial and ethnic difference," Howard told the Nine Network.

"So, if 81 percent of the population is tolerant and supportive of ethnic and racial difference, then you can't simultaneously have underlying racism."

"There are some people in the Australian community who are racist but I do not believe the average Australian is a racist," he added.

Australians hold up an anti-racism banner in Perth, December 17. (Reuters File Photo)



Netanyahu Elected Likud Boss

TEL AVIV, Occupied Palestine, Dec. 20--Benjamin Netanyahu swept to victory to lead Israel's Likud party after the rightist faction was shattered last month by the defection of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Reuters reported.

Netanyahu, a former prime minister who opposed Sharon's Gaza pullout and vows to fight further withdrawals from land Palestinians want for a state, won 47 per-

cent of the vote to 32 percent for Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, an exit poll showed.

Likud has led Israel for all but 10 years since it first took power in 1977, but is now battling for third place in opinion polls behind Sharon's new centrist Kadima party and leftist Labour. National elections are set for March 28.

The Likud primary was overshadowed by Sharon's admission to a Beit-ul-Moqaddas hospi-

tal on Sunday suffering from a mild stroke. Political analysts said worries over the 77-year-old former general's staying power could help Likud's fortunes.

Mindful of the election campaign ahead and of the need to keep the spotlight on Sharon's medical concerns, Netanyahu made a point in his victory speech of wishing him "good health."

Sharon's aides have rushed to reassure the

public he was in no danger. He was due to be discharged from hospital on Tuesday.

"Netanyahu has been restored to his natural place at the helm of Likud and with God's help he will also become prime minister," Likud parliamentarian Yuval Steinitz said.

With 10 percent of votes counted and the tally in line with the exit poll's findings, Shalom conceded defeat and offered Netanyahu his



Benjamin Netanyahu

support. Final results were not due until Tuesday.

WORLD News In Brief

East Timor Toll

LISBON--At least 183,000 people were killed in East Timor during its 24 years of occupation by Indonesia, a government probe into past human rights violations has concluded, according to a copy obtained Tuesday by the Lusa news agency.

Fragile Coalition

BEIRUT--Lebanon's powerful pro-Syrian parliament speaker Nabih Berri was on Tuesday seeking talks with anti-Damascus forces in a bid to save the fragile coalition government after a boycott by Shiite ministers.

Chaos

BETHLEHEM--Gunmen briefly occupied the offices of the mayor of Bethlehem on Tuesday in the countdown to Christmas, highlighting the rampant security chaos in the Palestinian territories.

Brief Suspension

COLOMBO--Sri Lanka's parliament was briefly suspended on Tuesday as the political proxies of Tamil Tiger rebels shouted slogans demanding troop pullbacks from the north and violence again flared around army-held Jaffna.

Indonesia:

Foreigners Risk Kidnap

JAKARTA, Indonesia, Dec. 20--Foreigners in Indonesia could be kidnap targets for violent militants in the Christmas and New Year season, Syamsir Siregar, Reuters quoted the chief of the National Intelligence Agency (BIN), as saying on Tuesday.

News emerged last month that a Web site purportedly set up under militant orders gave instructions on how to shoot foreigners in the

streets of Jakarta or throw grenades at motorists stuck in traffic in the car-clogged city.

Siregar told reporters that another militant tactic, possibly in the holiday season, could be kidnapping.

"They plan to do something in order to mess the situation up...They will think a thousand times to do something."

"They have plans to change targets, like to kidnap people from a certain group," he said,

adding that foreigners or Indonesian officials would be likely kidnap subjects.

That would be a new twist in attacks in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, which has already seen sporadic bombings blamed on the Al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah, a militant Southeast Asian network.

Authorities say Jemaah Islamiyah was behind the October 2002 Bali bombings that killed 202 people, subsequent suicide attacks against the Marriott hotel and Australian embassy in Jakarta, and again in Bali in October this year against popular tourist sites.

The first attack killed mainly foreign tourists, but in the latter three most of the dead were Indonesians, despite the nature of the targets.

The US and Australian embassies have issued warnings in recent weeks that foreigners could be targeted during the holiday season.

Police across Indonesia, a sprawling archipelago of 17,000 islands, have been tightening security ahead of the holidays to prevent attacks, including a repeat of 2000 Christmas Eve bombings of churches in several Indonesian cities which killed 19.

Around 85 percent of Indonesia's 220 million people are Muslim. Christians form the second largest religious group in the country.

US to Cut Troops in Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, Dec. 20--US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has signed orders that will reduce the number of American troops in Afghanistan to 16,000 from 19,000 by next spring, The New York Times reported on Tuesday.

The orders mean the Louisiana-based Fourth Brigade of the 10th Mountain Division will only deploy 1,300 soldiers to Afghanistan instead of all 4,000 troops as previously scheduled, a senior military officer was reported as saying.

The troops staying at home will be on standby, the official told the newspaper, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Pentagon spokesman Larry Di Rita told the newspaper the decision to reduce a portion of the Army unit scheduled to replace the 173rd



US soldiers stand at a makeshift checkpoint in Bagram, north of Kabul, July 11. (Reuters File Photo)

Airborne Brigade, now in southern Afghanistan, was based on recommendations from the senior US commanders in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

"The overall level of security forces in the country, NATO's role, and the political developments are all moving in the right direction," Di Rita was quoted as say-

ing. A Pentagon spokesman was not immediately available for comment.

Rumsfeld signed the troop reduction orders on Monday and a formal Pentagon announcement is expected on Tuesday, The New York Times said.

The American troop reduction has been anticipated since NATO

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