

Indian EC to finalise polls schedule for 4 states by Jan 15

PTI, New Delhi

The Election Commission is likely to firm up by middle of this month a poll schedule for Himachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura where elections are due in February.

While the term of Meghalaya and Himachal Pradesh assembly is expiring on March eight and 11 respectively, that of Nagaland and Tripura would come to an end on March 22.

Last month, Election Commissioners T S Krishnamurthy and B B Tandon had reviewed the overall preparations, law and order situation, progress in issuance of voters' identity cards and training in use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) for the polls at a meeting with Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs) of these four states.

US spy drone crashes in Pakistan

AFP, Karachi

An unmanned US spyplane crashed Wednesday shortly after taking off from an airbase used by the US military in southern Pakistan, officials in Sindh province said.

The surveillance drone went down in an unpopulated area some seven kilometres (four miles) from the Shahbaz airbase in Jacobabad, Sindh home secretary Aslam Sanjrani said.

"It was a small US surveillance plane which was unmanned and it crashed around midday," Sanjrani told AFP.

Pakistan joins UNSC as non-permanent member

PTI, United Nations

Pakistan, along with Angola, Germany, Spain and Chile on Tuesday joined the Security Council as non-permanent members for a two-year term ending December 31, 2004.

The Council has fifteen members including five permanent and ten non-permanent, five of whom retire each year. The non-permanent members are elected by the General Assembly on regional basis and generally the regional groups endorse the candidates after consultations within the group.

The composition of the new Council is the United States, Russia, Britain, France, China (permanent members with veto power), Bulgaria, Cameroon, Guinea, Mexico, Syria (due to retire on December 31, 2003), Angola, Chile, Germany, Pakistan and Spain.

Pakistani jeweller on FBI wanted photo

AP, Lahore

A Pakistani jeweller said Wednesday his picture is among those of five foreign-born men the FBI says may have entered the United States on falsified passports. He said he has never visited the United States.

An Associated Press photograph of Mohammed Asghar taken at his shop in Lahore on Wednesday was a near-perfect match for the one included on the FBI list under the name Mustafa Khan Owasi, down to the prominent mole on Asghar's left cheek.

FBI spokeswoman Angela Bell said the bureau was not able to confirm that Asghar is the man in the picture. She said the FBI planned to interview him in Pakistan.

US troops detain former Afghan minister

AFP, Islamabad

US troops have arrested a former Afghan minister who heads an influential Pashtun tribe in eastern Pakia province, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported Thursday.

Haji Mohammad Naeem Kochi was picked up by US forces Wednesday on a highway running south of Kabul en route to a meeting with his Ahmedzai tribe, the Pakistan-based news service said.

AIP said Pakia governor Raz Mohammad Dalili confirmed the arrest but gave no reason.

Naeem Kochi was a minister in the government of moderate Afghan leader Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, who took over as interim president after the fall of the communist government in 1992.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists from Islami Jamiat-e-Tulba, a student wing of Pakistan's main fundamentalist Islamic party of Jamaat-Islami, chant anti-US slogans during a protest rally against a threatening US-led attack on Iraq, in Karachi on Thursday. The protesters demanded to the United States not to launch any military strike against Iraq.

Koirala threatens to expose 'design' behind Nepali royal massacre

AFP, Kathmandu

Former prime minister of Nepal Girija Prasad Koirala has threatened to expose what he said was a 'grand design' behind the 2001 massacre which left 10 members of the royal family dead, a report said Thursday.

"I deliberately choose to keep shut but I will expose everything at an opportune time," he was quoted as saying by the Kathmandu Post at a public meeting in the south-eastern town of Janakpur Wednesday.

"The time is not far away," he added.

King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya and seven other royals were gunned down on

June 1 2001.

An official investigation found that a drunk Crown Prince Dipendra had carried out the shootings, before killing himself.

The massacre shocked the world and was seen as a calamity by the people of the Himalayan kingdom, many of whom revere the king as an incarnation of the Hindu god Lord Vishnu.

When Birendra's brother Gyanendra took over the throne shortly afterwards people protested on the streets.

Koirala said he had been keeping quiet over the issue fearing that it would trigger fresh unrest, according to the Kathmandu Post.

Koirala also criticised

Gyanendra, who in October sacked the elected prime minister who had dissolved parliament to hold mid-term elections. The king then installed an interim government and indefinitely postponed the polls.

"The king still has the chance to make a correction to the constitutional process by reviving the parliament," Koirala told the meeting.

"The constitution of Nepal stipulates that elections must be conducted within six months of the dissolution of parliament, and it goes without saying that the dissolution is subject to either timely elections or restoration of the House of Representatives," he said.

'India planned break-up of W Pakistan in 1971'

PTI, London

The US administration in 1971 suspected India of "scheming" not just the separation of East Pakistan, but the "break-up" of West Pakistan and even moves against the "Pakistani side" of Kashmir, secret British official papers claim.

The US administration believed that India was about to "dismember" Pakistan, the papers released at the Public Record Office in London, after 30 years of the 1971 Indo-Pak war, show.

The papers include secret transcripts of a summit meeting between US and British leaders in December that year.

The papers show that US President Richard Nixon and his foreign affairs adviser Henry Kissinger "suspected India of scheming not just the separation of East Pakistan, but the break-up of West Pakistan and even moves against the Pakistani side of Kashmir." Nixon told the British that Indian Prime Minister Indira

Gandhi was being steered by the Soviets, in response to the building of ties between Pakistan and China.

And Kissinger said Nixon had secretly contacted the Soviet leadership to seek an assurance it would restrain India from breaking up West Pakistan.

But it was only after the American Seventh Fleet took up a threatening posture offshore that the promise was forthcoming, the papers show.

This was the war that saw a freedom struggle in which India played a helpful role against an oppressive military hierarchy in West Pakistan, led by General Yahya Khan, creation of Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the flight of hundreds of thousands of refugees into India.

But the transcripts of talks between Indira Gandhi and Heath, and of the Heath-Nixon summit in Bermuda, show it was more than that.

Gandhi, on a visit to Britain, told Heath of the pressure in her Cabinet for her to take Pakistani territory and not return it.

India, she said, had seen Pakistan tying itself to China and now the United States also was establishing links with China, the papers reveal.

Nixon's friendly overtures to the Chinese, and their closeness to Pakistan, she said, had made it necessary for India to sign a treaty with the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, Yahya Khan was also seeking British support. He wrote to Heath outlining the Indian military build-up near Pakistani territory, which included seven army divisions confronting West Pakistan and eight near East Pakistan, the papers show.

He also wrote about the deployment by India of comparable Air Force and naval threats. The offensive posture adopted by India pointed in the direction of conflict, not of peace, he wrote, according to the papers.

Pakistanis to rally against war on Iraq, US actions

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistanis are expected to hit the streets on Friday to protest against possible US military action in Iraq, amid a swelling of anti-US sentiment over FBI raids and US bombing at the border with Afghanistan.

Rallies have been called by Islamic party leaders in major cities and towns across Pakistan, Washington's key ally in the 14-month campaign to crush al-Qaeda and Taliban extremists following the September 2001 attacks in the United States.

"The protest is being held to condemn possible US aggression against Iraq," Riaz Durrani, a spokesman for the far-right religious party alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) told AFP.

"It will also be a protest against growing US interference in Pakistan and raids by its FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) agents."

Impatience with US agents' operations in Pakistan has been mounting over the arrests of several doctors on suspicion of al-Qaeda links in recent months. The raids have seen anti-US hostility spread to the country's professional classes.

Anger was further fuelled by Sunday's US bombing raid against a Pakistani border patrol at the north-west frontier with Afghanistan, which the military here says hit Pakistani territory.

Witnesses said two bombs hit an empty religious school, while the US military said only one 500-pound bomb fell just inside Afghan territory.

The bombing followed a reported clash between US forces and a Pakistani border scout on the porous border.

The incident threatens to undermine pivotal cooperation between US

Fog disrupts rail, air, road traffic in Delhi

PTI, New Delhi

Normal life was thrown out of gear in the capital on Thursday morning as a dense fog engulfed the city disrupting train schedules and forcing closure of the runway at the Indira Gandhi International airport.

All flights and trains were delayed as the thick fog reduced visibility to virtually nil and left motorists with no other option but to move at a snail's pace.

Airport sources said flight schedules were hampered since Wednesday evening itself. However, the runway was closed for all incoming and outgoing flights after midnight, they said adding the first flight was expected to take off late in the day.

With fog settling down on railway tracks, nearly all trains entering the capital were delayed, the source said adding all precautions had been taken to ensure safe arrival of trains at various railway stations.

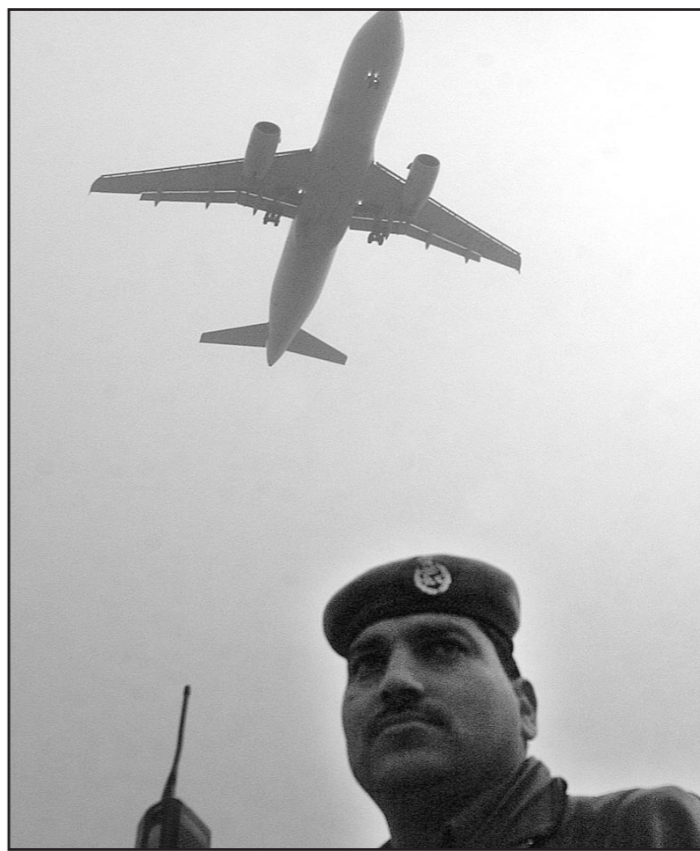


PHOTO: AFP

A plane lands at New Delhi's airport amidst thick fog on Thursday. A cold spell in northern India has claimed over 100 lives, with heavy fog disrupting flights, trains and road traffic.

Leaflets in Afghanistan warn Laden, Omar

AFP, Islamabad

A previously unknown organisation has distributed pamphlets in eastern Afghanistan vowing to bring to justice Osama bin Laden, Taliban leader Mullah Omar and former premier Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported Wednesday.

The pamphlets carrying pictures of the trio wanted by the US forces, urged people to "recognise the black faces of Afghanistan history," the Pakistan based private news service said.

Saudi dissident "Osama fled his country. He is a traitor, who plunges into anarchy any country he visits," the leaflets quoted by the agency said.

AIP said the single sheet pamphlets published in Pashtu language by the so called Ittehad-e-Islami Mujahedin and Muhajereeh Afghanistan (Unity of Afghan holy warriors and refugees) asked people to beware of the "sinister" designs of the trio.

India will not resume talks with Pakistan: Advani

Hinduism against religious extremism

PTI, New Delhi

Acknowledging that international pressure has not worked on Pakistan to end cross-border terrorism, Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani on Wednesday made it clear that India would not resume talks with that country till it stopped sponsoring terrorism.

"International pressure does not work beyond a point on any country. There will be no dialogue with Pakistan till it stops abetting cross-border terrorism and dismantles the terrorist infrastructure," he told reporters here.

Asked if there was any change in the level of terrorist infiltration into Jammu and Kashmir, Advani said "infiltration has not come down. There may have been a change because of winter snow blocking mountain passes".

Replying to questions, the Deputy Prime Minister said Pakistan had not shown any change in its policy towards state sponsorship of terrorism.

"I do not see any prospects of resumption of Indo-Pak talks. There might have been a change in Islamabad's words but not in action," he said when asked about Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's offer to hold a dialogue with India.

"We would win the war against terrorism with our own might," he said, adding India does not need to prove its credentials to the international community after having taken peace initiatives vis-a-vis Pakistan despite the 1999 Kargil conflict.

Maintaining that security and development would continue to top the Government's agenda in 2003, Advani said the Centre would also work towards linking of major rivers and giving a boost to information technology and housing sectors.

AFP adds: Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani said on Thursday, Hinduism opposed religious extremism as he tried to consolidate the ruling BJP's fresh push to portray itself as tolerant.

"Let's understand that India is

Cold spell claims 185 in India

AFP, Patna

A cold wave sweeping northern India has claimed 185 lives, reports said Thursday.

The eastern state of Bihar, the poorest in India, has been the worst affected by the cold spell which began last month with 131 deaths, the Hindustan newspaper said.

Local officials would only confirm the deaths of 12 people following the onslaught of a westerly cold wind in the last two days in the state, especially in areas close to Himalayan foothills.

Most deaths have been reported from rural parts of the northern region where temperatures on Wednesday night dipped to between 5.0 and 6.0 degrees Celsius (41 and 42.8 degrees Fahrenheit), authorities said.

A further fall in temperature is predicted.

Relief department officials said money had been provided to buy wood for the poor. Some 45 per cent of people in Bihar live below the poverty line, according to government figures.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian army soldiers display a Russian-made rocket during a presentation to the press of seized weapons and ammunition in Tregam, some 110 km north of Srinagar on Thursday. Officials said it was the first time such a weapon was recovered in the area. The ordinance, along with photos of Saudi dissident Osama Bin Laden was recovered from a militant hide-out in the Kupwara forest.

Kashmir army camp water pipe blown up

Arms, explosives seized: Two killed

AFP, Srinagar

Muslim rebels overnight blew up a pipe supplying drinking water to an Indian army camp in the first such strike in violence-hit Indian-administered Kashmir, local media said Thursday.

"The militants blew up the pipe supplying water to Rashtriya Rifles camp at Arampora (in the northern Baramulla district)," Kashmir's leading English daily Greater Kashmir said.

The Rashtriya (National) Rifles is the Indian army's counter-insurgency wing in Kashmir, which is in the grip of a 13-year anti-Indian rebellion that has so far claimed more than 37,500 lives.

"It is the first time they (militants) cut off the water supply to the forces," the newspapers said.

Officials sources told AFP that the water supply was restored in the

morning. Security forces have on several occasions cut power and drinking water supplies to mosques and shrines, where militants have barricaded themselves in to escape arrest.

"That step is always aimed at trying out the militants and preventing damage to religious structures," a paramilitary official said.

Meanwhile, two civilians were killed in separatist-related incidents in Indian-administered Kashmir, while Indian troops recovered a cache of arms and ammunition including rockets and grenades, officials said Thursday.

Police said a Muslim carpet-weaver was shot and wounded overnight by suspected Muslim militants in the village of Sailya, near the well-known picnic spot of Pahalgam, 100 km southeast of Srinagar, the summer capital.

LTTE to extend radio broadcasts

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels will extend their radio broadcasts following controversial imports of new equipment after obtaining a licence for the first time, a pro-rebel website reported Thursday.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will "increase its broadcast time and distance" from January 16, the Tamilnet.com website said, adding that the broadcasts would be beamed on 98 FM.

The increased coverage is possible after a five-kilowatt FM transmitter was imported in October through the embassy of Norway, which is acting as peace broker in Sri Lanka.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga wrote to Norwegian Prime Minister Kijell Magne Bondevik to protest against the arrival of the radio equipment.

Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) party has also charged

that the Tigers could reach southern India with their new radio broadcasts, undermining India's security.

The Tamilnet website quoted the LTTE's political-wing chief S.P. Thamilselvan as saying that more transmitting power was essential in the present "climate of peace" to inform Tamils living in areas under their control of the developments in the Norwegian-backed peace bid.

"Recent efforts by the People's Alliance and other extremists to draw the Norwegian government into this matter... and creating a controversy over this can only be viewed as an ill-conceived attempt to sabotage the peace process," Thamilselvan said.

Kumaratunga's scathing letter to the Norwegian premier came four days after the government of her arch-rival, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, cleared the Norwegian embassy of any wrongdoing in the matter.