

Georgia's military ready for talks

TBILISI, Georgia, Jan 12: Georgia's new military leaders prepared for talks today on a promised transfer to civilian rule, less than a week after toppling President Zviad Gamsakhurdia from power, reports Reuters.

Armenia granted temporary exile to the deposed leader, who fled there to escape a two-week siege of his parliament in which 113 people were killed and 420 wounded.

But the situation in the republic remained tense as armed Gamsakhurdia loyalists clashed with police and demonstrators held rallies in support of the President, who insists he remains legitimate leader of Georgia.

Jaba Loseltani, a leading member of the ruling military council, said police fought a gun battle with a convoy of 60 armed Gamsakhurdia supporters who crossed into western

Georgia from Armenia early on Saturday.

Four people were injured in the fighting near the town of Akhalkalaki.

Provisional Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua, describing the situation in the west of the country as tense, said another group of Gamsakhurdia supporters was expected to cross into Georgia shortly.

He said units of the military council's national guard were waiting for them on the border and hoped they would lay down their guns. Sigua has guaranteed complete immunity and protection to returning members of Gamsakhurdia's entourage.

He also said he had asked Armenia to move Gamsakhurdia further from Georgia's borders. The 52-year-old President is now at Idzhevan, some 40 km (25 miles) from the frontier.

Chadli resigns

ALGIERS, Jan 12: Algerian President Chadli Benjedid resigned on Saturday, swept away by Islamic fundamentalist forces and controversy unleashed by his democratic reforms, reports Reuters.

second general election vote was expected to confirm the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in parliamentary power, leaving confusion over whether the poll could go ahead.

"It is clear the security forces are in charge," said one European diplomat. "I think there will not be a second round."

"Chadli has obviously gone because of the result of the vote," which precipitated either a split in the regime or Chadli bowing to the inevitable.

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Israeli FM to visit China

ISRAELI Foreign Minister Daviv Levy will visit China in late January, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced Sunday, reports Reuters from Beijing.

The trip is expected to result in full diplomatic ties between China and Israel and a more significant role for Beijing in the Middle East peace process.

In a brief news release carried by the new China news agency, the Foreign Ministry did not give a date for Levy's arrival or say how long the trip would last.

China has been the only one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council without ties to the Jewish state since the former Soviet Union renewed links last October.

Italy to lift freeze on Iraqi funds: Italy Saturday said it was partially lifting a freeze on Iraqi funds held by Italian Banks in connection with a UN embargo, reports AFP from Rome.

The government said the funds could be used to pay for exports and credit export guarantees for products from Italy.

However, the funds so used should not exceed 10 per cent of Iraqi holdings in each Italian bank.

The freeze was ordered in August 1990 in the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

The government said its decision aimed to allow Iraq to pay for essential goods and meet conditions set by the UN for relaxing the embargo.

The reports said that at the top of India's exchange programme would be commander-level visits to the national training centre in California, and that New Delhi would urge Washington to expand such visits to four other US centres.

Iranian food aid for Afghans: Iranian military planes have landed in this snow-bound capital, bringing food and clothes for the poor, the government announced Saturday, reports AP from Kabul.

The airlift was the second relief operation in as many months undertaken by Tehran with the consent of President Najibullah's Communist-style government.

Civil Aviation Minister Wader Safi said two Iranian C-130 transport planes landed at Kabul Airport on Thursday. Military experts say each plane can carry about 65 tons of relief supplies.

Despite the bitter cold, Afghans say this winter has not been as brutal as in past year. The markets have food for this city of 2 million people, but many can't afford it.

3 Miami men to die in Cuba: Three Miami men accused of trying to invade Cuba and start a rebellion against President Fidel Castro were sentenced Saturday to death by firing squad, the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina reported, says AP from Mexico City.

The Havana Province prosecutor's office was quoted as saying the Supreme Tribunal early this week would review the sentence for Eduardo Diaz Betancourt, 38; Daniel Candelario Santovenia, 36; and Pedro de la Caridad Alvarez Fedroso, 26. The Mexican news agency Notimex said they are permanent residents in Miami.

A statement faxed to The Associated Press in Miami said the men belonged to an anti-Castro group, previously unknown, called Rescuc. It threatened retaliation if they are executed.

Prensa Latina said the three men confessed to training in southern Florida for a terrorist mission in Cuba with the full knowledge of American authorities.

Croatia, Yslavia to maintain truce: Croatia and Yugoslavia's federal army agreed on Saturday to hold regular talks to help maintain a nine-day-old cease-fire in the breakaway republic, officials said, reports Reuters from Hungary.

Representatives of the army and Croatia agreed to set up a formal link after meeting of more than seven hours in the southern Hungarian town of Pecs.

Joao Milla Gomes, deputy spokesman of the European Community monitoring mission in Yugoslavia, which chaired the meeting, told reporters both sides agreed to meet regularly at a neutral site.

Officials have not decided on the controversial Eurofighter project being developed since 1988 by Germany, Britain, Italy and Spain. Stoltenberg said a decision to continue or drop the project would be taken this summer.

US-DPRK talks on N-arms soon

KABUL, Jan 12: The return of former king Zahir Shah, now exiled in Rome after his overthrow almost 20 years ago, seems to be the only hope for peace in strife-torn Afghanistan, diplomats and politicians here say, reports AFP.

Never before has the ex-monarch's name been so persistently bandied about as Afghanistan's key to peace as it has been done since the beginning of the new year.

The King has become the talk of the town. Suddenly people here are serious about his role in the peace process. Politicians who though the idea farfetched now accept Zahir Shah is the bridge to peace, an Asian diplomat said.

Many feel chances of the King's return have improved considerably after Pakistan suddenly tried to establish contact with him in Italy 10 days ago.

Islamabad last week officially confirmed that its army chief, Asif Nawaz, had met Zahir Shah's son-in-law, Abdul Wali, in Rome.

Pakistan, earlier refused to have any high level contact with the former King so as not to jeopardise its relation with the Peshawar-based Afghan Mujahideen resistance, which claims Zahir Shah paved the way for the communist rule in Afghanistan.

Zahir Shah ruled the landlocked country for 40 years before being overthrown in a coup led by his cousin, Mohammad Daoud, in 1973.

His ouster was followed by a series of coup d'etats that eventually led to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Pakistan, has described the Rome meeting between its army chief and Zahir Shah's son-in-law as a way to promote a political settlement in Afghanistan and end the 13-year-old war which has cost more than million lives.

Diplomats here perceive the Nawaz-Wali meeting as indicative of a major shift in Islamabad's policy on the Afghan issue.

The news of international efforts to get Zahir Shah to return home has already come under attack by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the Pakistan based Hezb-I-Islami, the largest and most powerful resistance group.

Hekmatyar has warned that alleged moves by Pakistan and the United States to bring back the King would turn Afghanistan into another Lebanon.

Politicians here envisage the King's role in Kabul as one of heading an interim government until free elections are held under a United Nations peace plan.

"To pave the way for a political settlement, the King can be a center acceptable to all," said Farid Mazdaq, a young democrat in and deputy chairman of President Najibullah's Ruling Watan (homeland) Party.

Mazdaq, a close associate of Najibullah, acknowledged that the Afghan president could not be the transitional government had acceptable to all parties, nor could "any of the Mujahideen groups become an alternative center."

When a foreign correspondent quoted Najibullah as saying current political developments demand that the 77-

year-old King move fast or miss the train, Mazdaq quipped: "The train knows the King is old, so it will move slowly."

Russia awards part of Black Sea Fleet to Ukraine

MOSCOW, Jan 12: Russia has moved to heal a rift with Ukraine by awarding part of the disputed Black Sea Fleet to Kiev, a joint communique published by Tass news agency today said, reports Reuters.

The two sides said they agreed that part of the powerful fleet would be excluded from strategic forces under joint Commonwealth control and "become part of the armed forces of Ukraine."

Ukraine had previously demanded full control of the

entire fleet from July, with Russia insisting it should remain under Commonwealth command.

The dispute between the two most powerful republics had threatened a disastrous split in the Commonwealth of Independent States which emerged last month with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"The negotiations have helped to strengthen trust and cooperation in the relations between Ukraine and the Russian Federation" said the

statement, signed after a day of talks in the Ukrainian capital Kiev.

It did not make clear how the fleet of 300 ships and 70,000 men would be divided.

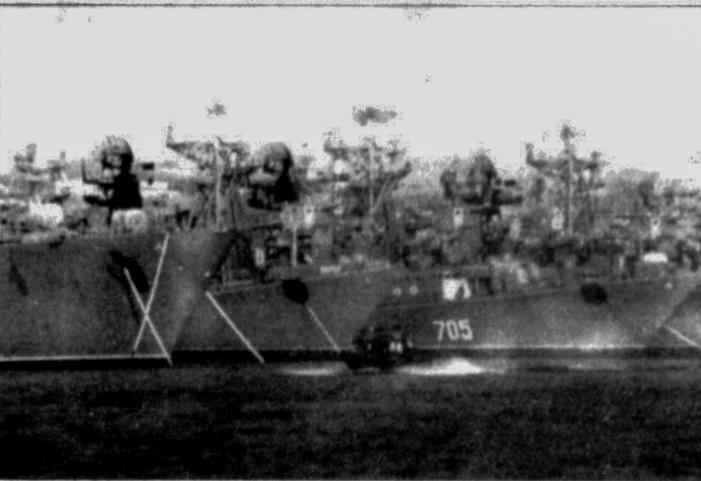
It seemed likely, however, that Russia had gone further than a previous offer to hand over a small part of the fleet for purely local tasks such as border protection.

Ukraine, which won its independence last month, has declared it must become a naval power. It has already be-

gun forming its own army on the basis of former Soviet army units on its territory.

Both sides pledged to refrain from unilateral actions and to resolve all contentious points through negotiation, including the civil and political status of servicemen connected with the reorganisation of the armed forces.

Addressing Western concerns about their commitment to East-West arms accords, Russia and Ukraine said they would start negotiating immediately on how to fulfil Moscow's agreement on international security and disarmament.



Anti-submarine ships belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States Black Sea Fleet lie at anchor in Sevastopol Ukraine. —AFP photo

They pledged to act swiftly to ratify the US-Soviet START accord cutting strategic nuclear arsenals and the 1990 conventional forces in Europe agreement reducing forces from the Atlantic to the Urals.

The talks were led on the Russian side by Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev and Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Shakhrai, and for Ukraine by Minister of State for Defence Viktor Antonov.

With a proud history dating back to empress Catherine The Great, the Black Sea Fleet is a tempting prize and a powerful national symbol to Russians and Ukrainians alike.

The agreement followed a statement of "profound concern" over the row by the Belarusian parliament, which also became the latest to take control of Soviet armed forces on its territory in order to build its own army.

India to expand defence cooperation with US

NEW DELHI, Jan 12: The Indian armed forces, which previously banked on the Soviet Red Army for support, has now pinned its hopes for defence cooperation on the United States through military exchange programmes, reports AFP.

A planned visit on January 24 by a US military delegation, headed by Pacific Army Commander Lieutenant General Johnny Corns, to form an army steering committee is seen here as a first step in this direction.

Defence Ministry officials Saturday confirmed reports of the General's visit and said Indian Army Vice Chief V. K. Sood will host a meeting aimed at boosting existing military training exchange programmes.

The reports said that at the top of India's exchange programme would be commander-level visits to the national training centre in California, and that New Delhi would urge Washington to expand such visits to four other US centres.

The Times of India newspaper said Saturday that the Pentagon was keen to send officers to India's high-altitude warfare training centres in Kashmir.

"Ideally we would like to send top and mid level personnel to the US for advanced training in the future," said an official, reflecting New Delhi's hopes of expanding military cooperation.

The Times said the agenda of the one-day meet excluded the purchase of military hardware from the United States, but sources said it was likely that New Delhi would press for the opening of talks on such transactions.

The Pentagon plans to form a separate steering committee with the Indian Navy, the sources said.

Corns, who arrives here as a representative of the Pentagon, is also likely to present a response to India's request for several military subsystems, The Times said.

Defence Ministry sources said the armed forces last month sought equipment such as force multipliers and rotorcraft packages for helicopter operations from the US Army.

Despite previous assurances from Moscow, New Delhi has yet to extract a concrete pledge from any of the newly independent republics on defence cooperation.

France, Britain and Germany have, however, supplied airplanes and submarines for India's expanding armed forces.

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German army drops plan to buy heavy weapon systems

BONN, Jan 12: The German army decided Saturday to drop plans to buy a large number of heavy weapon systems, aiming at savings over 15 years of nearly 44 billion marks (29 billion dollars), reports AFP.

The decision was taken at an annual meeting between Defence Minister Gerhard Stoltenberg and the German military command. It had to be endorsed by the government and parliament.

The new "1993" plan, running up to 2007, took into account budgetary restrictions due to the enormous cost of German reunification and the disappearance of the Soviet threat.

The army's needs will also be reduced progressively under a made pledge at the time of unification that Germany would reduce its armed forces from 480,000 in the west and 170,000 in the east to a total 370,000 personnel.

However, it is maintaining funds for the purchase of a new turn-of-the-century fighter aircraft.

Officials have not decided on the controversial Eurofighter project being developed since 1988 by Germany, Britain, Italy and Spain. Stoltenberg said a decision to continue or drop the project would be taken this summer.

Earlier, the minister had said Germany was looking into the possibility of replacing the Eurofighter with either France's Rafale, the United

States F-18 or Sweden's Jaspripen.

The opposition Social Democrats have suggested sticking to the 24 Soviet-made Mig-29s inherited from the former East German forces. Informed sources have said the government is thinking about buying from Russia new Mig-29s, with which the air force is very happy.

Among the systems being dropped completely are the panther tank, a reconnaissance plane, and night operational capacity for Pahl anti-tank helicopters.

Two types of ground-to-air missiles, the American Hawk and the Roland produced by the Franco-German group

Euromissile, will not be upgraded.

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year-old King move fast or miss the train, Mazdaq quipped: "The train knows the King is old, so it will move slowly."

Intellectuals here acknowledge the King's importance in the peace process but say his return should not be seen as a return to a monarchical government.

Off the Record

Little battles

LAS VEGAS: Entertainer Rich Little will be able to keep joking on stage about his legal battles with his ex-fiancee under an agreement reached Friday, attorneys said, reports AP.

Melinda Saxe, a magician who performs in Las Vegas, is suing the celebrity impersonator for defamation, invasion of privacy and inflicting emotional duress. The lawsuit stems from her allegation that Little secretly videotaped the couple having sex.

After the lawsuit was filed, Little, 53, began joking about the situation in his stage act, prompting Saxe, 28 to seek a court order prohibiting such public comments.

Neither side would give exact details of the agreement lifting the order, but they issued a joint statement saying Little is 'now free to conduct his performance' without interference.

Saxe says she ended her relationship with Little last year when she learned that he had taped sexual encounters. The lawsuit, which was moved to federal court, seeks unspecified damages.

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Star Trek star gets her star installed

LOS ANGELES: Michelle Nichols, Lieutenant Uhura of 'Star Trek,' got her star installed on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and gave credit to a fan, Martin Luther King Jr, for persuading her to keep the job, reports AP.

Miss Nichols, 55, said she met King only days after she told executives of the NBC series she was leaving after just one season.

"He said, Michelle, you cannot leave 'Star Trek.' You have the first non stereotypical job in television," the black actress recalled the civil rights leader telling her.

"Your face and your creation of a character with such dignity must remain because it shines as a beacon and it changes the face of television," she remembered King saying.

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'Dangerous' good news for Jackson

LOS ANGELES: Michael Jackson's 'Dangerous' is the pop superstar's fastest-selling album, Epic records said. But it's got a way to go to catch up with his previous hits, "Bad" and "Thriller," reports AP.

Nearly 2.6 million copies of 'Dangerous' were sold so far, spokesman Glen Brunman said Friday. "This is the fastest-selling album in Michael's career," he said.

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'World war or sex war'?

TOKYO: Documents found recently in a Defence Agency library show the Japanese military ran 'comfort centers' where young girls, mostly Korean, were forced to sexually entertain troops during World War II, a newspaper reported Saturday, says AP.

The report by the nationally circulated Asahi Shimbun challenges Japan's official assertion that the wartime government was not involved in forcing women to serve as prostitutes.

The Asahi said the 1938 documents show the Imperial Army controlled recruitment of women, mainly from Korea, then a Japanese colony, and the operation of comfort centers in China.

The Asahi said that between 80,000 and 200,000 so-called 'comfort girls' worked in China, Southeast Asia and other war areas.

Yoshida and Japanese officials were not immediately available Saturday for comment.

The Japanese government has long maintained that private Japanese enterprises were responsible for the wartime prostitution.

Japan repeated that position when three Korean women, who said they were forced to serve as comfort girls in China during the war, sued the Japanese government last month, seeking 20 million yen (160,000 dollar) each in damages.

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Kuwaiti restrictions dissatisfy expatriates

KUWAIT CITY, Jan 12: Major Kuwaiti restrictions on foreign families here have led to widespread discontent among the Emirati expatriate workers, most of whom may no longer be able to bring over wives and children, reports AFP.

The issue seems to dominate conversations of foreigners in Kuwait, notably the Egyptian expatriate community totalling 100,000, according to various estimates.

"In eight out of 10 cases, it will be impossible for an expatriate to settle family members in this country," said Mohammad Salem, an Egyptian Professor of English living in Kuwait for 20 years and whose monthly salary is not more than 300 dinars (1,000 dollars).

The new regulations aim at "discouraging the rebuilding in Kuwait of a foreign community as large as the Palestinian" one, said an Iraqi living in Kuwait since 1960 who declined to be identified.

The new immigration regulation announced Wednesday only allows families to join foreign workers in the public sector with salaries above 450 dinars (1,500 dollars) and 850 dinars (2,210 dollars) for those employed by private concerns.

A dozen foreign residents, in a statement published in the press, have called for the repeal of the regulation or at least an easing of the restrictions.

A public sector employee, according to the regulations, can bring his wife and three children. If his family is larger, the father must pay an annual tax of 100 dinars (345 dollars) per child.

In the private sector, expatriate employees can bring their wives and only two children each and must pay an annual tax of 200 dinars (690 dollars) for each additional child.

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Major changes in Salvadoran armed forces

SAN SALVADOR, Jan 12: El Salvador's armed forces announced major leadership changes on Saturday, removing two hard-line colonels from their commands as the military prepares for peace after 12 years of civil war, reports Reuters.

Colonel Francisco Elena Fuentes, powerful commander of the first Infantry brigade, which includes the capital of San Salvador, was posted to neighbouring Guatemala in a military liaison post, while Colonel Julio Cesar Ortigala was moved from his command in the rebel-ridden province of Usulután to head the Military Academy.

The reshuffle, "the biggest change in command positions in a year, involved a total of 25 colonels and Lt General Rene Emilio Ponce in charge as Defence Minister.

The changes coincided with feverish negotiations at the United Nations in New York, where envoys of the US-backed government and leftist rebels are haggling over the final terms of a peace plan due to be signed in Mexico City on January 16.

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