

France will sell Pakistan three minehunters

PARIS, Jan 17: France has agreed to sell Pakistan three minehunters, Pakistani officials said on Thursday, but the outcome of a request by visiting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for Mirage combat planes remained unclear, reports Reuters.

"An agreement has been reached on the minehunter sale with one vessel to come from French navy ranks and other two to be built, one in France and the other in Pakistan," a member of Sharif's delegation told Reuters.

But Pakistani officials did not comment on reports that Paris would turn down a request for Mirage 2000 combat aircraft for fear Islamabad would be unable to pay. Pakistani sources have said Sharif wants to buy 44.

Sharif, here on a five-day visit, was seeking clarification from French leaders about a report in the left-wing newspaper Liberation which said Paris had decided against the Mirage sale.

Liberation said the United States, which has banned delivery of its own arms to Pakistan because of concern over Islamabad's nuclear programme, had told French authorities it also opposed France's sale of combat aircraft to Pakistan.

"I can not say in advance what the results of the talks now under way between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and our leaders will be, but I would bet the Mirage request is going to be turned down," a high-rank-

ing French government official said on Wednesday.

The 600-tonne minehunters are of the Eridan class built in France with Belgian and Dutch help. The cost of the vessels is around 1.3 billion franc (235 million dollar), the specialists said.

French officials later said an agreement was signed granting Pakistan 367 million franc (67 million dollar) for the building of a thermal power station by the French Compagnie Bernard Fim, and the supply of equipment to a hydro-electric power station by Alstom, another French firm.

Gulf War was a horrible tragedy: Carter

ATLANTA, Jan 17: Former President Jimmy Carter said Thursday the Gulf War was a "horrible tragedy" because little has changed in the region, reports AP.

The United States failed to learn from the conflict and has done nothing to bring healing to devastated areas, he said. The war ended with most of Kuwait destroyed and much of Iraq, but with Saddam Hussein still in power.

"I thought from the beginning it was a horrible tragedy," Carter said. "There was no effort to negotiate peace."

"What are the results of the War? Saddam Hussein is still there. Kuwait and Iraq are destroyed. People are dying."

Thousands of people celebrate peace pact signing Salvadoran civil war ends

MEXICO CITY, Jan 17: Salvadoran government and rebel leaders have signed a hard-won pact putting a formal end to 12 years of civil war that left at least 75,000 people dead, reports AP.

Citizens of this war-weary nation joyously welcomed peace with rival downtown block parties that underscored how long and uphill the road to reconciliation will be.

Tens of thousands gathered in two central plazas, just a block apart, after President Alfredo Cristiani and leftist rebel chiefs signed in Mexico City a historic accord ending 12 years of civil war.

In Plaza Civica guerrillas and supporters of the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front gathered. The neighbouring plaza Liberated was the scene of festivities

hosted by the governing Republican Nationalist Alliance, the rightist party known as Arena.

Celebrants in both squares danced until Friday's wee hours to Latin rhythms provided by a half dozen bands.

The atmosphere in both was of jubilation and thanksgiving. But both festivals were also militantly partisan.

"The long night of El Salvador is ending," said UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. "It is a time to rejoice and celebrate."

The pact calls for a February 1 cease-fire, the eventual dismantling of guerrilla forces, the reduction of the military by half, reforms in the judicial and electoral systems and land reform.

Agreement was reached after nearly two years of

United Nations-mediated negotiations.

At a news conference, President Alfredo Cristiani said that with a peace accord signed he had no problem envisioning that former rebels could take power in El Salvador by way of elections.

"There's absolutely no fear," Cristiani said. "If they do it, they're welcome. This is democracy. But they must do it within the democratic framework."

A short time later he returned home to San Salvador, where wildly cheering crowds celebrated the end of the country's worst civil upheaval.

Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari was host for the ceremony, which was also a summit. Seven other Latin American presidents and Spanish Prime Minister Felipe

Gonzalez witnessed the signing of the document.

US Secretary of State James A. Baker III represented President Bush.

The signers included five rebel leaders and five government representatives headed by Presidency Minister Oscar Santamaría.

Cristiani admitted there may be diehards who do not want to give up the fight in El Salvador, and he said he would fight them.

He named no names, but it is well known that towards the end of the peace negotiations in New York in December he had to contend with ultra-rightist groups in the military who opposed giving any concessions to the rebels.

Now that peace has been accepted, said Arturo Rivera V. Damas, the archbishop of San Salvador, "there must be justice and truth and later this will be crowned with pardon and forgiveness."

"In this new era we must make an effort in favour of rebuilding the Salvadoran family," said the churchman, who was a key link between the government and the rebels in the early stages of the peace process.

Santamaría referred to the guerrillas as "countrymen" and predicted "a new stage in the history of the country will be written."

Schafik Handal, who headed the rebel negotiators, said the rebels had "tried time and time again to try to change the country through pacific means but this way was closed to us."

"We had to pick up arms," he said. "It was necessary and legitimate."

"Long live peace. Long live El Salvador. Long live Mexico," he concluded.

In mid-plaza, 19th century hero Gerardo Barrios, namesake of the military academy, sat high on his metal horse, a red flag emblazoned "FMLN" raised incongruously in his hand.

The Salvadoran war is the last major conflict in the region, where instability began in 1979 with the Sandinista uprising against the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua and quickly spread to El Salvador.



Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani (L) shakes hands with Salvadoran guerrilla leaders after the signing of a peace accord at the Chapultepec Castle. The Treaty ends 12 years of civil war. —AFP photo

7 republics agree on common oath for combined force

LONDON, Jan 17: Leaders on nine former Soviet republics met in Moscow yesterday to discuss military and economic issues and seven agreed on a common oath for members of a combined force, Tass news agency said, reports AP.

The agency, monitored in London by the BBC, also said the meeting, presided by President Boris Yeltsin of Russia, agreed to set up a commission to study a conflict between Russia and Ukraine over sharing out the former Soviet Union's Black Sea fleet.

Yeltsin's Press Secretary, Pavel Voschanov, said an oath for servicemen in the strategic forces of the 11-republic Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) — which are to remain under

centralised command — had been approved.

He added that seven states which had adopted a decision on creating a single armed force had adopted a common oath for that force.

However, in depth discussion of military issues was put off until early next month, according to a brief statement to journalists by Yeltsin, Tass said. This was because the leaders had not had time to acquaint themselves with documents relating to the issues.

The meeting started with the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tadzhikistan, and Turkmenistan in attendance. They were joined later by those of Ukraine and Kirghizstan. The leaders of Moldova and Uzbekistan did not attend

at all.

Voschanov said the leaders signed a total of seven agreements at the talks, which he described as "on the whole, successful".

He said the Black Sea commission comprised officials from Russia, Ukraine and the military command.

A similar decision had been adopted on the Caspian Sea Fleet, comprising representatives from Russia and Azerbaijan as well as the armed forces, Voschanov said.

On non-military issues, an economic agreement had been signed setting a limit of 50 per cent on profit margins, in order to "restrain the unwarranted growth in prices in conditions of producer monopoly," the Russian spokesman said.

Bush, Yeltsin talks Feb 1

WASHINGTON, Jan 17: President Bush and Russian President Boris Yeltsin will hold talks at the White House on February 1, the US president's office announced Thursday, reports AP.

The meeting will come the day after the two presidents join other heads of state at a summit in New York for leaders of the 15 countries on the United Nations Security Council.

It will be the fourth meeting for Bush and Yeltsin, including two previous visits by the Russian leader to the White House.

Gaddafi urges Arabs to halt ME talks

NICOSIA, Jan 17: Libyan Leader Muammar Gaddafi has urged Arabs to halt US-sponsored Middle East peace talks with Israel if the West punishes Tripoli for its alleged involvement in terrorism, reports Reuters.

"Arabs (should) reconsider all peace projects that America has implemented" and is seeking to implement between them and the Zionist enemy (Israel) if Libya is subjected to any hostile sections by America and Britain," the official Libyan news agency Jana quoted him as telling Arab parliamentarians on Wednesday.

In his speech, excerpts of which were carried on Thursday by Jana, Gaddafi said Egypt should also "freeze" its peace accords with Israel if action is taken against Libya.

Gaddafi was quoted by Jana as saying that Libya had offered all forms of cooperation, but added that "the Lockerbie case is nothing but a pretext to destroy Libya."

Israeli govt on verge of collapse

JERUSALEM, Jan 17: Two rightist parties have pushed Israel's coalition government to the verge of collapse by deciding to quit over Middle East peace moves, reports Reuters.

A political crisis flared when the Tzohar and Moledet parties reduced Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's support in parliament on Thursday to a minority.

The two groups said they would resign from the government at Sunday's cabinet meeting because Israeli negotiators in Washington discussed Palestinian self-rule at Arab-Israeli peace talks.

Israel may free Obeid

NEW YORK, Jan 17: An exchange of prisoners between Israel and Shiite Muslims is expected soon with Israel willing to give up its key captive, kidnapped Hizbullah cleric Sheikh Abdel Karim Obeid, US Jewish sources said on Thursday, reports Reuters.

United Nations envoy Giam-domenico Picco met international Red Cross officials in Geneva last week, said the sources, who are close to the negotiations but asked not to be identified.

Shamir's aide Yossi Ahimetz told Israeli television the government has not fallen yet.

"The government at this point exists," he said. "The government continues to function and do its job. We are in a crisis... we have to solve the problem either by early elections or any other way we decide soon."

Foreign Minister David Levy said the peace talks to end the decades-old Arab-Israeli conflict would not be stopped.

"The peace process should stay and continue even after the crisis," he told reporters.

Meanwhile, Israeli forces on Thursday completed the evacuation of five new Jewish settlements set up in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip in reaction to Palestinian attacks.

"All the sites were evacuated," an army spokesman said. "The last caravan was stuck in mud and we finished removing it today."

Settlers moved mobile homes to four areas in the West Bank and one in Gaza on Wednesday after unidentified gunmen shot at an Israeli bus and car in the West Bank a day earlier wounding those inside.

The locations they chose were mostly sites of previous attacks.

Off the Record

Now for women!

GENEVA: Women will soon be able to wear condoms, finally getting the power to protect themselves from AIDS and other sexually diseases, reports AP.

The new condom goes on sale in Switzerland early in February and in France and Britain later in the year. American health experts could recommend its approval at the end of the month.

The condom is unlikely to replace the pill for contraception, but has been widely welcomed because it allows women to take action to prevent AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The vaginal condom is a large, lubricated, polyurethane adaptation of the male version. It is about seven inches long, has flexible rings at both ends and is inserted like a diaphragm. The inner ring fits behind the pubic bone and the outer ring remains outside the body.

Unlike the diaphragm, which only stops sperm from passing the cervix and thus prevents pregnancy, the female condom also protects the entire vagina and labia from any HIV virus on a penis or in sperm.

The concept was developed by a Danish gynecologist in a bid to tackle infertility problems, according to Dr Patrick Rowe of the World Health Organization.

"Our interest in the condom is not as a contraceptive, but rather as an additional barrier method against AIDS," he said. He said the female condom would never replace the male version — but it would make a big difference for women with more than one sexual partner who are at risk from AIDS.

Love with bulldozer

BEVERLYHILLS, Netherlands: Hans and Sandra got married Thursday, six months after he tried to win back her love with a bulldozer, reports AP.

Their wedding was almost as thunderous as an event as Van Wilk's jealous rampage last summer through the quiet, neighboring town of Heemskerk.

Flung into international notoriety, the couple fought off an army of TV crews, photographers and reporters after they exchanged vows in the town hall.

Hans Van Wijk, 28, had broken off his relationship with Sandra Van Wijk, 34, when he saw her with another man last July 18. Van Wijk, a heavy equipment operator, went to get his earth mover and bulldozed every thing in his way along a 7-kilometer (4-mile trail) path to find her hiding in her sister's house, which he also rammed.

The rampage caused about a 1 million dollar damage and landed Hans a 18-month jail sentence. He got day of for the wedding.

Topless Patricia

NEW YORK: Patricia Kluge, former wife of media tycoon John Kluge, will appear topless in the March issue of Penthouse, the magazine said Thursday, reports AP.

Three or four small photos of her, taken in the 1970s when she was a model for a British men's magazine, will accompany the "U S A Confidential" column by contributing editor Sharon Churcher, said Penthouse spokeswoman Catherine Koatz.

Kluge, a German immigrant who founded Metromedia Co. is worth an estimated 5.9 billion dollar. He's listed by Forbes magazine as the richest individual in America.

Guttenberg in 'cocoon' is cocooned

LOS ANGELES: Steve Guttenberg, star of such films as "Diner", "Cocoon" and "Three Men and a Cradle", has filed for divorce from his wife of three years, reports AP.

Guttenberg, 30 and model Denise Bixler have been separated since June. Guttenberg filed for divorce on grounds of irreconcilable differences, said his lawyer, Howard Thaler.

The Superior Court divorce petition, filed Wednesday, said the couple had no children. It said there was a pre-nuptial agreement, but provided no details.

Serbia, Croatia head for new confrontation

BELGRADE, Jan 17: Serbia and Croatia headed today for a new confrontation two days after Croatia won international recognition, denting the prospects of ending six months of fighting in Yugoslavia, reports Reuters.

Some 45 United Nations military observers will be deployed in Croatia today to monitor a two-week-old ceasefire which has raised hopes that the UN will send in a peace-keeping force of about 10,000 troops.

"Croatia can be recognised only inside the borders where it has power," Borisav Jovic,

WASHINGTON, Jan 17: Israeli and Arab negotiators ended the latest round of Middle East peace talks on Thursday having made progress on procedure but not on substance and with no agreement on where they will resume talking next month, reports Reuters.

Israeli envoys wrapped up four days of US-sponsored talks by meeting a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation and a subcommittee on Jordanian issues.

The main achievement of the talks was the parties success in resolving a procedural wrangle over the status of the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation that paved the way

for the beginning of real negotiations.

"It is actually historic, because it is the first time in history that Palestinians and Israelis sit down together to negotiate an equal footing," said Palestinian spokesman Hanan Ashrawi.

Chief Jordanian negotiator Abdel-Salaam Majali said there had been some progress "but let us not make it too big. This time, still, there is a profound difference."

Israel's Ambassador to Washington, Zalman Shoval, said the parties had at least started discussing the issues at the heart of their decades-old conflict.

"I'm slightly upbeat on the

peace process," Shoval said.

"We had a good meeting yesterday with the Palestinians. There is our agenda on the table. They also submitted an agenda."

"There are some points of reconciliation between these points and we can start serious talks."

But when the Palestinians on Tuesday demanded an end to Israel's settlement drive on the occupied West Bank and Gaza strip and put forward an ambitious blueprint for self-rule in the territories, progress quickly ground to a halt.

The Israelis refused to discuss settlements and did not put forward counter-proposals

on self-rule, though they said the Palestinian proposals were clearly unacceptable.

Separate talks matching the Israelis with Syria and Lebanon ended on Wednesday with no progress reported.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's right-wing coalition was already under intense pressure not to make concessions, with two small ultra-nationalist parties that gave it a slender parliamentary majority threatening to leave the government.

The move could trigger early elections in Israel and put the peace process on hold.

From the United States viewpoint, the main achievement was that Arab-Israeli

peace talks, which only a year ago would have considered a wild dream, are fast becoming a matter of routine.

"The only way to move down this road is for the parties to engage in direct discussions of their differences. That is what they're now doing and we think that is significant achievement," said State Department Spokesman Richard Boucher.

The parties said on Wednesday they had agreed to hold a new round of talks in February, probably February 13-23. But agreement was not so close on the location. While the Arabs want to come back to Washington, Israel is insisting the talks move closer to

the Middle East.

AFP report adds: The United States is prepared to intervene in bilateral Israeli-Arab peace talks to decide on the venue and date of the next round if the parties cannot agree, a senior US official said. "It is our hope, as it has been from the beginning, that the parties would work these things out themselves," President George Bush's National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft said.

"But as in the past, if it is necessary for the United States to play a role that the parties cannot play themselves, then we will do it," he said in an interview with four international news agencies.

Driver shot dead in Myanmar

MAE SOT (Thailand), Jan 17: Myanmar soldiers shot dead a young pedicab driver who fled when they rounded up young men in a market to act as porters in a border combat zone, witnesses said today, reports Reuters.

Army dress gangs took away more than 100 young men from Mounmein in Mon State on Wednesday, said residents contacted by telephone from this Thai frontier town.

"They stopped the Rangoon-bound trains and dragged off the young men. They closed the local market and took men to be porters," one said.