

Half of Americans okay air strikes on Iraq

NEW YORK, Jan 17: Almost half of Americans think the US air attacks on Iraqi military sites were appropriate but almost as many feel the response should have been stronger, according to a poll released on Saturday, reports Reuters.

The Newsweek magazine poll also said 49 per cent of respondents felt there should be another, larger attack on Iraqi military sites if provocations by Saddam Hussein continue, and that some eight in 10 Americans support military action to force the Iraqi leader from power.

Only eight per cent of those questioned felt the attacks on Wednesday by US and British bombers "went too far." Forty-six per cent said it was the right response and another

43 per cent said the attacks did not go far enough.

President George Bush said the attacks were in retaliation for Baghdad's continued violations of ceasefire terms reached after the 1991 Gulf War, during which US-led forces reversed Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Eighty-two per cent of those polled supported resumed attacks to force the Iraqi leader from power while 15 per cent were opposed. The support was the highest for Hussein's ouster of any of seven polls conducted by the magazine over nearly two years.

But 46 per cent of Americans would support normal relations with Iraq if it stopped violating the ceasefire provisions.

Islamic shrine in Benares next target of VHP

BENARES (India), Jan 17: Fears are growing that a solitary Islamic shrine amid a sea of Hindu temples in this holy Indian city could face the same fate as the Babri Mosque, which was razed by Hindu zealots last month, reports AFP.

The banned Hindu extremist group the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, world, Hindu council), which spearheaded the drive for the December 6 destruction of the 465-year-old Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, has said the controversial mosque built by Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb is next on its agenda of demolitions.

Police have strung a makeshift fence around the ancient Islamic shrine but

construction firms have turned down offers to build barricades around the mosque saying they feared a Hindu backlash. "We are taking no chances," a police spokesman said Friday as army soldiers backed by formidable Gurkha fighters camped in the city of thousands of Hindu temples to Lord Vishnu, the preserver of life and Shiva, the destroyer.

Some 1,200 paramilitary riot police have been deployed around two neighbouring shrines and the city administration plans to fence off several homes that are located in the cluttered district in central Benares known locally by its Hindu name of Baranasi. The four-minaret mosque is 150 feet (45 metres) away

from one of India's holiest temples to Lord Shiva and cradles a Shiva shrine in its courtyard, and Hindus say that it stands on the ruins of several temples.

"If you look across its western wall it would be clear that it was a temple or a cluster of temples," said one of the head priests of the Kashi-Vishwanath temple, the destination of millions of Hindu pilgrims who visit it every year.

The VHP says the site housed a temple until 1015 when it was demolished by Qutub Uddin Aibak, Muslim founder of the Delhi sultanate.

The Turkish King also built the country's tallest monument during his reign.

The temple was re-built by moderate Moghul Emperor Akbar but was replaced with its mosque by Muslim ruler of Aurangzeb after it was again toppled in 1666, the priests and the VHP assert.

The adjacent Kashi-Vishwanath temple was built in 1771 by Ahalyabai, a Hindu warrior queen from the Holkar dynasty which resided in central India.

A petition filed in a local court last year on the Hindu-Muslim dispute is pending, but Hindu fundamentalists have said that after Ayodhya they will target the mosque in Benares, 640 kilometers (384 miles) southeast of New Delhi.

15 feared killed in Indian train mishap

NEW DELHI, Jan 17: A 55-year-old German woman and at least five other people were killed in northern India when the train they were travelling in slammed into a derailed freight train, news reports said Sunday, reports AP.

Rescuers trying to find more victims amid the twisted wreckage of the train said at least nine more people were feared killed and more than 65 injured in the accident Saturday night, Press Trust of India reported.

It quoted railway authorities as saying that a total of six people had died in the accident. They included the German woman and the two drivers of the passenger train. At least 38 people were injured, according to authorities.

The accident occurred when the Rajdhani Express

crashed into 16 wagons of a freight train strewn on the tracks, the report said. The freight train derailed apparently because of an earlier accident.

The body of the German woman and five other victims were brought to the city of Kanpur near the site of the accident, Press Trust reported.

The German woman identified her nationality moments before she died, gasping for air, United News of India reported. She did not give her name and authorities were unable to ascertain it from her belongings or other sources, a railway official reached by telephone in Kanpur said.

Press Trust said the German woman was travelling New Delhi where the train's journey originated to its destination in Howrah



KUWAITI-IRAQI BORDER: Kuwaiti soldiers pass an APC at a Kuwaiti army checkpoint on the road leading to the Iraqi border here Saturday. The Kuwaiti army in on high alert following Iraqi military incursion into the demilitarised zone. — AFP/UNB photo

Flood claims 19 in Mexico

TJUANA, Mexico, Jan 17: At least 19 people have died and more than 6,000 others have been driven from their homes in the Baja California peninsula after a week of heavy rains, the Mexican news agency Notimex said on Saturday, reports Reuters.

About 150 US, Canadian and European tourists remain trapped on the western Mexican peninsula that borders the US state of California as flooding has rendered road transport impossible in much of the region.

Tijuana, which lies across the border from San Diego, was the city worst hit by the Pacific ocean storm systems. Five thousand Tijuana residents are homeless, roads have collapsed under the constant rain, and more than 40 neighbourhoods cannot be reached by vehicle due to the flooding.

Serb cruelty may lead to lifting arms embargo on Bosnia: Kohl

BONN, Jan 17: German Chancellor Helmut Kohl said on Saturday an arms embargo against Bosnia might have to be lifted if Serb forces in the republic reject a peace proposal, reports Reuters.

Kohl said aggression by Serb forces in Bosnia would raise questions about the justification of the ban on sending weapons to the former Yugoslav republic.

"Then we really have to think about whether it is justifiable to impose a weapons embargo on one country while another country, which is the aggressor, has all the means

necessary to destroy human lives," Kohl said in excerpts of a speech broadcast on German television.

"The international community must wait for a few days to see whether those who bear the chief responsibility for these crimes, Serbia or the Serbian part of Bosnia-Herzegovina, come to their senses," Kohl told a Congress of his Christian Democrats (CDU).

He was referring to a peace proposal drafted in Geneva last week and agreed by the leader of rebel Serbs in Bosnia, Radovan Karadzic, who must win the approval of the

"Parliament" of his self-declared republic.

The European Community has given the Serbs until Tuesday to accept a peace package aimed at ending nine months of civil war in Bosnia, or face UN punitive action.

Kohl's centre-right coalition government has until now backed the UN arms embargo imposed on all of former Yugoslavia, despite calls from the Muslim-led Bosnia government for weapons to fight superior Serb forces.

But Kohl on Saturday spoke angrily about allegations of atrocities committed against Bosnian civilians, including the

systematic rape of Muslim women.

"You have to consider how unacceptable it is that in a country that is unprotected, people are being treated with a barbarism that is rare for recent history," he said to applause from CDU members at the meeting in Neuss near Duesseldorf.

Bonn has ruled out deploying German troops if the UN sends peacekeepers to Bosnia, citing the history of Nazi occupation in Yugoslavia and a ban in Bonn's constitution on sending combat troops outside the NATO area.

Muslim children protest allied attack on Iraq

NEW DELHI, Jan 17: Muslim children chanting "Long live Saddam Hussein" and "George Bush down" staged a protest outside the United Nations office here Saturday against the UN led air raid on Iraq, reports AFP.

The nearly 50 children were joined by a dozen adults in the demonstration. Nearly twice as many police officers guarded the complex.

The demonstrators dispersed peacefully after chanting anti-US and pro-Iraq slogans and waving placards expressing sympathy for Iraq.

A statement released by the All India Muslim Youth and Students Council, which organised the protest, called for a halt to "US-led aggression" against Iraq and end to UN mandated economic sanctions.

Bush ready to 'shift gears'



Files photo dated November 18, 1992 shows president-elect Bill Clinton (L) shaking hands with US President George Bush in front of the White House during Clinton's first visit here since the presidential elections. The new President is to take up his new function January 20. — AFP/UNB photo

CAMP DAVID, Maryland, Jan 17: President George Bush said on Saturday he was not bitter or resentful over leaving the White House and was ready to "shift gears" in a few days and be a private citizen again, reports Reuters.

"There's no point in trying to continue something that isn't," he said of his presidency, which has three more days to run before President-elect Bill Clinton is inaugurated on Wednesday.

"And I'm trying to conduct myself with dignity, and hopefully in a spirit of total co-operation with Governor Clinton," Bush said, adding: "No bitterness in my heart."

The President made his comments to reporters at the Camp David, Maryland, presidential retreat. He and his wife Barbara were spending their final weekend at the presidential retreat with visiting Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and his family.

BRIEFLY

30 killed in HK bus mishap: An overcrowded bus travelling from Shanghai to Anhui province crashed into a river killing 30 passengers including a week-old baby, Wen Wei Po reported here today, reports AFP from Hong Kong.

The newspaper said the accident happened Saturday at Danyang, a town just outside Shanghai in Jiangsu province.

Most of the 50 passengers were migrant workers on their way home to Anhui.

Miyazawa arrives in Brunei: Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa arrived in Brunei on Sunday for talks with the monarch of the oil-rich Islamic kingdom on the last stop of his Southeast Asian tour, AP from Bandar Seri Begawan says.

Miyazawa also was to attend a dinner given by the monarch, Sultan Hassanalk Bolkiah, reputed to be the world's richest man, with assets exceeding \$25 billion.

On Monday, Miyazawa was to meet with representatives of Japanese companies in Brunei before leaving for home. Earlier on the tour, he visited Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

Japan buys some of its oil and gas from Brunei. Japanese officials with Miyazawa said there were no outstanding issues between the two nations, and the visit was aimed at keeping up good relations.

Bus mishap takes 12 lives in Karachi: At least 12 people were killed when a bus crashed into a canal near Shewan in southern Pakistan, police said on Sunday, Reuters reports from Karachi.

The bus carrying some 100 people lost control after its tire broke on Saturday, the police said.

Protest against Japan's N-programme: About 100 members of a local religious group protested Japan's recent shipment of plutonium in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul on Sunday, reports AP from Seoul.

"Japan should stop its nuclear development programme immediately," shouted the protesters from the Chondokyo religious group, jabbing their fists into the air.

A ship carrying more than a ton of plutonium arrived in Japan two weeks ago from France, where the plutonium was reprocessed from spent nuclear fuel.

The protesters charged that Japan would use the plutonium to make nuclear weapons, although Tokyo says it is for a peaceful nuclear power programme.

"Japan's nuclear development programme is becoming a major threat to (South Korea) and other neighbouring countries," said a statement.

Boeing skids off runway in China: A crowded Boeing 737 airliner crash-landed and skidded off a runway in Haikou in southern China's Hainan province before coming to rest close to a busy road, a newspaper said here yesterday, reports AFP from Hong Kong.

No injuries were reported following the crash Saturday of the jet belonging to regional carrier Southwest Airline Company, based in Chengdu, Sichuan province, Wen Wei Po reported.

The paper blamed low visibility caused by poor weather for the accident.

The jet carrying some 200 passengers careered hundreds of metres (yards) off the runway and smashed through the perimeter fence, coming to rest close to a congested highway.

Two nuns abducted in Philippines: Two Spanish nuns were seized Sunday by armed men on a largely Muslim island in the southern Philippines, officials said, AP reports from Zamboanga.

Sister Fatima Oribaren and Sister Julia Forrester were picnicking at a beach on Sulu island when they were taken at gunpoint by three men aboard a motorized outrigger, according to church officials.

Bishop Benjamin de Jesus said the two were Spanish nationals and had been in Sulu for two years with the Carmelite Sisters of Charity. He had no further details about their background.

There was no word on the motive or the identity of the kidnapers.

Kidnappings are not uncommon in Sulu or other southern areas populated by the country's six million-strong Muslim minority. Most of the kidnappings there are for ransom and to enhance the prestige of various factions in the highly fragmented Muslim community.

Off the Record

Mouse disease strikes terror in Moscow

MOSCOW: An outbreak of a rare disease spread by rodents has killed one child and hospitalized more than 50 people in the Nizhny Novgorod region, east of Moscow, a news agency reported Saturday, according to AP.

The epidemic of what residents call a "mouse disease" has affected several villages around the district centre of Voskresenskoye, ITAR-Tass said. The region is 400 kilometres (245 miles) east of the Russian capital.

More people are being hospitalized, and local specialists and regional authorities are trying to treat those infected and curb the spread of the epidemic, it reported.

"Regrettably, one of the patients, a 10-year-old boy, was not saved," ITAR-Tass said.

People contract the disease, hemorrhagic fever, by eating food contaminated by mice or inhaling the dust of grain or straw in which rodents often live.

Protesters rough up liberal lawmaker

MOSCOW: Anti-government protesters demanding access to state-run television roughed up a liberal lawmaker on Friday as he tried to cross a picket line in front of the Russian legislature, reports AP.

Russian television showed several of the estimated 1,000 demonstrators pushing and shoving lawmaker Lev Ponomarev, who later demanded a legislative investigation into the activities of the protesters.

The demonstrators, who represented the "Working Russia" movement were demanding time on television to read a statement calling for the dissolution of a new Federal Information Center, the ITAR-Tass news agency said.

"Working Russia" and other pro-Communist groups worry that the new center, which is responsible for overseeing state media, will limit access to radio and television by groups disagreeing with the government.

Several demonstrators were allowed inside the legislature building to present their demand for television time. Speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov rejected the demand, ITAR-Tass reported.

Warm spell rouses animals from winter hibernation

HELSINKI, Finland: A warm spell has woken animals from winter hibernation, including irate bears and groggy hedgehogs pestering Finns for food, officials said Friday, reports AP.

The warm winter, with snows melting even in arctic Lapland is playing havoc with the wildlife, said Raimo Hissa a zoologist at the University of Oulu in north Finland.

Hissa said there have been dozens of reports of bears—which are supposed to be sound asleep—roaming the usually frozen wilds because of freakishly warm temperatures.

"Many of the bears have been woken by melting, dripping snow and when they come out they find there is no food," Hissa said. "Even mothers with their young are on the move, which is most unusual."

Zoologists have reported the late migration of birds, and the Helsinki Zoo switchboard has been jammed with callers asking what to do with young hedgehogs rudely woken from their winter slumber.

"People just don't know what to do with the hedgehogs. We tell them they should build them winter homes and feed them," said Pertti Pollanen, a zoo manager.

Smuggling heroin costs life

KATHMANDU: A Nepalese citizen has cost his life by smuggling heroin in his stomach, reports Xinhua.

Police found capsules of white heroin weighing 610 grams in the stomach of the body of Kunchar Gurung, who arrived here by a Bangkok-Kathmandu flight on January 8 in an unconscious condition, local press reported Sunday.

Meanwhile, police found 50 milligram heroin from a 25-year-old dead man in Kathmandu on Friday.

As the body bears injection marks on various parts, it is presumed that the unidentified man must have died of drug abuse.

The number of drug addicts is estimated at more than 30,000 in Nepal.

Haitian army agrees to negotiate on democracy

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti, Jan 17: The army announced Sunday it has agreed to United Nations-brokered negotiations to advance democracy in Haiti, reports AP.

The army has also agreed to the appointment of an interim prime minister, said a UN source, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The army announcement on state television followed the delivery of a letter from exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in which he agreed to negotiate with coup supporters for the first time since his overthrow in September 1991.

UN special envoy Dante Caputo and army and government leaders met for most of Saturday.

Caputo was sent to Haiti to discuss Monday's sensational elections which the United Nations, United States and Organization of American

States had denounced as illegitimate.

It wasn't clear whether the announcement would affect the elections, in which the military-backed government of Prime Minister Marc Bazin was expected to gain a majority in the 27-seat Senate.

The UN source said the army was accepting the establishment of a civilian observer force to supervise the process toward democracy.

He cautioned the government had only agreed to a framework for negotiations, terming any agreement now as "the end of the beginning."

Tougher issues lie ahead, such as the question of an amnesty for army coup leaders and a timetable for Aristide's return.

Another meeting between Caputo and Bazin was scheduled for later in the day, the source said.

India's secular social fabric falling apart?

BOMBAY, Jan 17: After the Hindu-Muslim bloodbath in Bombay, India appears headed towards a crossroads between modernisation and retreat into an Iran-style theocratic state, political analysts said on Sunday, writes a Reuters analyst.

Forty-five years after the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru fulfilled the nation's "tryst with destiny" to win independence and put India on the path of socialism, secularism and industrialisation, the country is at a watershed.

While Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao appears determined to integrate India into the world economy, abandoning 40 years of inward-looking socialism, increasingly strident voices are steering the country of 870 million towards Hindu nationalism.

Hardline Hindus targeted

Muslim homes during Bombay's riots in which at least 500 people died, forcing and exodus from a city previously known for its tolerance.

"It's something like the ethnic cleansing that's happening in Bosnia," said senior Bombay police official AA Khan, "the riots have been organised for a specific purpose — to remove a certain community from certain areas of the city," he told the times of India.

"We will not stop now. The Hindus will unite like never before, the nation needs a strong and united force of the Hindus," declared Bombay's hardline Hindu leader Bal Thackeray, chief of the radical Shiv Sena (Shiva army) movement.

Rao said on Friday during a visit to Bombay that India was in danger of breaking apart if communal hatred that trig-

gered 10 days of Hindu-Muslim rioting in India's commercial capital was allowed to fester and spread.

"If this country forsakes secularism it will break. I am absolutely convinced of that," he told reporters.

"We need a sustained programme to bring back secularism," he declared, saying that in the past Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Parsis had lived together mostly in harmony, despite the agony of a partition of independence in 1947.

Rao, 71, said India had been disfigured in the eyes of the world by rioting which erupted after the destruction of a 16th century mosque by Hindu zealots in the northern town of Ayodhya last month.

Communal passions were being roused across the country, he said. The virus is slowly spreading... it is appearing in

places where it had absolutely no base before."

At least 1,100 people were killed in December's nationwide riots, India, whose Muslim population exceeds 100 million, also faces bloodshed in the northern states of Punjab, Kashmir and Assam.

But the Bombay riots stunned a country that has learned to live with periodic outburst of religious frenzy.

"This is the biggest crisis since the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi," VN Gadgil spokesman of the ruling Congress party said, referring to India's independence leader.

"The whole social fabric based on secularism is under attack from fundamentalists of both sides," he told Frontline magazine.

Since independence, a strong central government has

held together a confused mosaic of languages, castes, religions and races in the world's largest democracy. But separatist movements threaten to tear it apart.

"India is a geographical term," said the late British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the days of the British Raj. "It is no more a united nation than the equator."

The riots in Bombay, India's commercial capital, and the challenge to secularism "goes to the very root of the existence of the nation," said Rao, swept to power after the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed in a bomb attack.

He said the Bombay riots, which have triggered the exodus of tens of thousands of Muslims from the city, "could be the precursor of other similar disturbances."

Palestinian girl shot dead in Gaza

JERUSALEM, Jan 17: Israeli soldiers shot dead a 10-year-old Palestinian girl and wounded 15 other Arabs while dispersing demonstrators in the occupied Gaza strip on Saturday, Palestinians said, reports Reuters.

The army said it was checking the report.

Sherin Hussein was on her way to school in the Jabalya Refugee Camp when she was hit by a soldier's bullet intended for nearby demonstrators, witnesses said.

She died in hospital two hours later.

Thousands of Palestinians poured into the streets to attend the girl's funeral in Jabalya.

Soldiers, who stayed away from the funeral, shot and wounded 11 people in clashes in the camp.