

Disgruntled officials demand collective leadership in PLO

AMMAN, Nov 17: Disgruntled PLO officials sent their leader Yasser Arafat demands for reform on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

They said his leadership style and the organisation's weak peace talks performance risked losing all for Palestinians.

Haider Abdel Shaif, chief Palestinian negotiator in Middle East peace talks with Israel.

Angolan peace talks continue

LUSAKA, Nov 17: Security was tightened Wednesday around Angolan peace talks as they entered a third day in a mood of optimism that a cease-fire agreement is near, reports AP.

UN envoy Aloune Blondin Beye was pressuring the Angolan government and the UNITA rebel movement to sign a bilateral cease-fire, Zambian officials said.

The talks adjourned in an atmosphere of optimism Tuesday with the two sides asked to study a set of unspecified proposals, said Zambian officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Continuing a news blackout, Beye ordered the meeting hall at Lusaka's Mulungushi conference center sealed off, and police allowed only official vehicles into the guarded complex.

who lead an earlier call for collective leadership and more democracy in the PLO, was the most prominent signatory of the reform document, PLO officials said.

Others included PLO Executive Committee member Suleiman Najab who handed the document to Arafat on Tuesday, and Bashir Barqouthi, head of the Palestinian People's Party, Nabil Arman Arafat aide, Anis Gassem, an adviser to the peace delegation, Samih Abdul Fatah, the PLO envoy in Prague, and some of Arafat's close allies.

They all support the PLO-Israel accord but fear Arafat's autocratic style and a poor negotiating performance seriously risks losing Palestinians any gains.

They said the Palestine Liberation Organisation should be more professional and appoint negotiators with Israel on merit instead of factional considerations.

"What brings those behind the document is our conviction that the present moment is a historic opportunity that should not be lost as a result of the weak Palestinian performance and reasons attributed to our own failing," said Tayseer Arouri, an adviser to the peace delegation and one of the drafters of the reform.

"We will continue to demand improving the leadership performance and ensuring a collective leadership," he added.

50 killed as Afghan jets bomb town near Kabul

ISLAMABAD, Nov 17: About 50 persons were killed and 70 others injured Tuesday as Afghan government jets bombed Sarobi, a strategic town near Kabul, reports Xinhua.

There was a rain of bombs in Sarobi and the people fled for their life amidst total chaos and destruction, a report reaching here from Afghanistan said today.

The attack, launched by former Defence Minister Ahmed Shah Masood, a close ally of President Burhanuddin Rabbani, was aimed at driving forces loyal to Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar out of Sarobi.

The town, dominated by Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami, produces all of Kabul's hydro electric power. It is on the main highway to the Afghan

capital from the Pakistan border.

Hekmatyar's troops reportedly have cut power supplies to Kabul.

Meanwhile, hundreds of heavily armed Hezb-i-Wahdat troops, an ally of Hekmatyar, entered the centre of Kabul Tuesday for the first time since the Mujahideen took over power in Kabul in April 1992.

"We were enemies, and now we are making peace," said Baba Jan, a general of Masood's forces, with whom Wahdat has been fighting over the past months.

Observers said Wahdat was moving closer to Rabbani and could strike an alliance against Hekmatyar.

AFP adds, the strategic Afghan national highway linking Kabul with neighbouring Pakistan was closed today because of jet bombing that caused dozens of civilian casualties.

Travellers report that Mujahideen forces loyal to Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar who occupy the district centre of Sarobi, some 70 kilometres (43 miles) east of the capital, have cut the main road on which travels the bulk of Kabul's essential supplies.

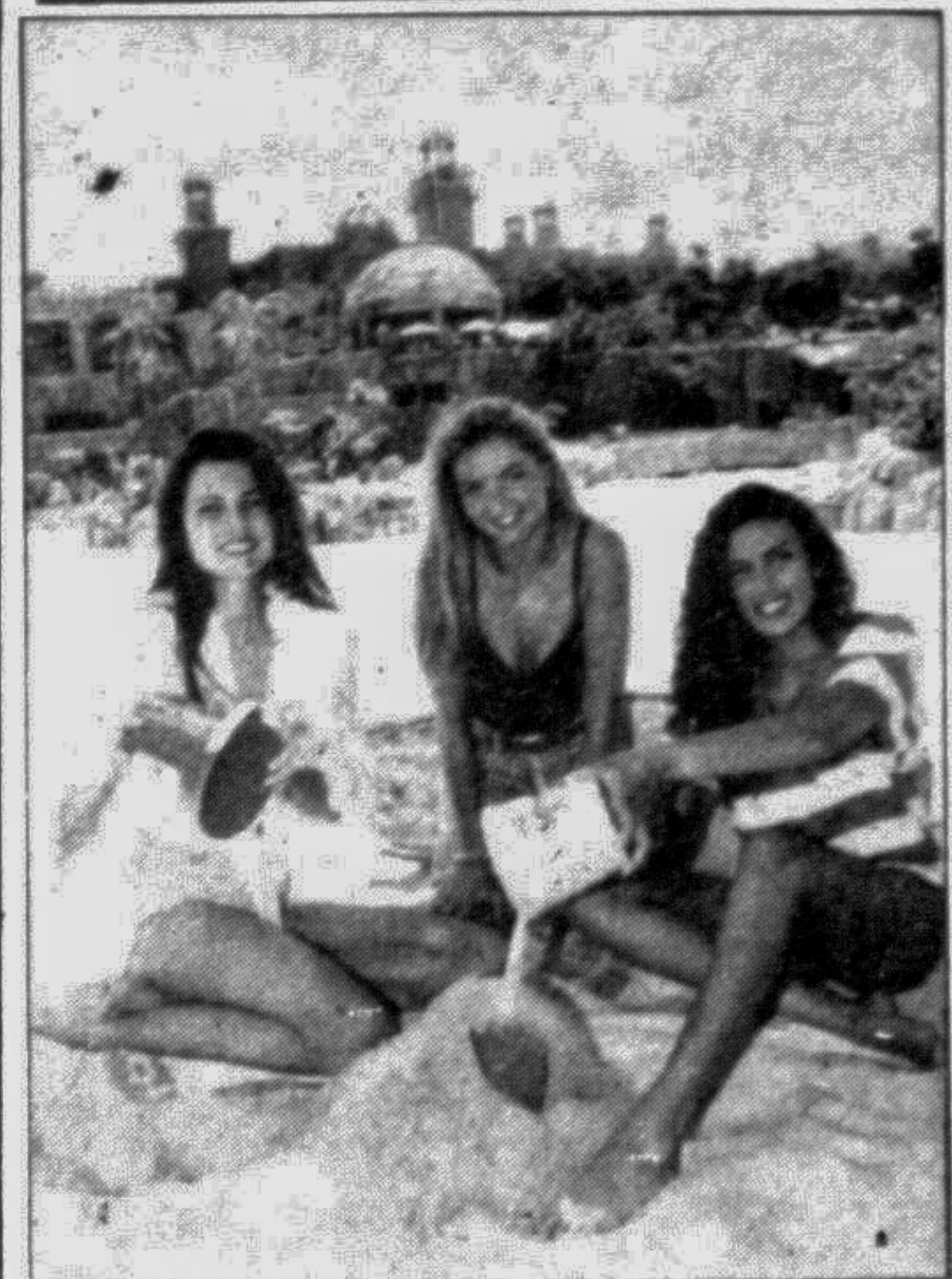
A large United Nations' convoy is among the vehicles stranded in Sarobi because of the bombing, according to travellers and an Afghan UN source.

The stranded convoy consists of 16 truckloads of winter-relief supplies dispatched by the world food programme (WFP) to Kabul from Pakistan. Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami faction is said to have cut the road as a result of the heavy bombing on civilian as well as military targets in Sarobi Tuesday afternoon, and again Wednesday morning.



A group of supporters of the Communist Party protest inside the Lenin Museum Tuesday in Moscow. The Russian government signed a decree closing this Museum, which opened in 1936, and the building will be used for the City Council after the December 12 elections. —AFP photo

Off the Record



Building sand-castle on the beach at the Lost City Tuesday are (L to R) Miss Colombia Silvia Isabel Duran Angarita, Miss Holland Hilda Van der Meulen and Miss Mauritius Viveka Babajee before the finals due to be held in South Africa Nov 27. —AFP photo

Mile-long bridge of bras

GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK, Arizona Nov 17: An artist wants to bridge the Grand Canyon with his own lingerie line of brassieres, but he's getting the cold shoulder from park officials, reports AP.

The artist, who calls himself Nicolino, hasn't actually asked permission to collect 10,000 bras and string them across the Canyon, but the answer is no, park spokesman Jim Tuck said. "The park was established for its scenic beauty," Tuck said. "A string of American flags - well, anything stretching across the Canyon would be inappropriate."

Nicolino, 53, of California, told the Rocky Mountain News in Denver that he has already received 1,500 bras. He said he hoped to string the line of lingerie across the Canyon in 1995.

"It's about the puritanical obsession with the breast," Nicolino said. "It's about breast implants and victimising the health of women. It's about connecting a woman's self-identity to the size of her breasts."

"I'm trying to keep it on the humorous side." Nicolino wasn't specific about where in the Canyon his art would be placed, but said the bridge of bras would be a mile-long.

The Canyon is 10 miles (16 kilometers) across at its most visited spot, Grand Canyon village on the South Rim.

Polar bears punch lights out

KAKTOVIK, Alaska: The polar bears on Barter Island will punch your lights out, reports AP.

The animals have knocked out as many as 26 runway lights in a single night at an airstrip on the island, about 200 miles (320 km) above the Arctic Circle. The 4,800-foot (1,600-metre) strip is illuminated with coloured lights on 3-foot (90-centimetre) plastic stems.

"The polar bears seem to be fascinated with these lights as if they were toys," said Peggy Kelly, Air Force radar station chief on the island. "They've been seen punching the lights like a punching bag until they break."

Tracks in the snow show the bears are single-minded in their quest. They move in a straight line from one light to another, Kelly said recently.

The bears normally are out on the ice hunting seals this time of year, but villagers landed two whales, so the animals have stayed on the island scrounging for the remains, Kelly said.

The island is dark virtually round-the-clock this time of year.

Poor self-image haunts Diana

GORSLAS, Wales: Britain's Princess Diana, in an apparent reflection on her own experience, said on Tuesday that one of life's greatest challenges was learning to like yourself and coming to terms with personal problems, reports Reuters.

The 32-year-old princess, widely reported to have suffered from an eating disorder associated with a poor self-image, was speaking during a visit to a centre for young drug addicts.

"Everyone has to come to terms with their own problems. Learning to like yourself is the hardest thing," she told 27-year-old Brian Roades at the centre in Dyfed, Wales.

The estranged wife of Prince Charles, the heir to the throne, is reported to have struggled for several years with the eating disorder bulimia, a syndrome of vomiting.

The condition has been linked in some cases to unhappiness and low self-esteem.

In a speech taken as a tacit admission of her fight with bulimia, Diana said in April that eating disorders sprang from a "spiral of secret despair" caused by the trauma of growing up and coping with life.



UN human rights investigator says

Restrictions on civil, political rights still exist in Myanmar

YANGON, Nov 17: A United Nations human rights investigator said Tuesday he had seen "encouraging changes" in Myanmar but restrictions still exist, "particularly civil and political rights", reports AFP.

Yoizo Yokota of Japan told reporters at Yangon airport before leaving that he had visited two prominent political prisoners, Tinu and Aung Khin Sint.

But he said the military government again had rejected his request to see Myanmar's most prominent dissident — Aung San Suu Kyi — has been under house arrest in Yangon since 1989.

Both Tinu and Aung Khin Sint looked well and spoke normally when he saw them in Yangon's Insein jail, he said.

"I didn't see any signs of physical torture at all and they also said the treatment was generally good," Yokota said, adding it was the first time in three visits he had been allowed to see Tin U.

Tin U, a co-founder of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), also was arrested in 1989 and sentenced to three years in jail on unspecified charges. His sentence later was extended to 10 years.

NLD member Aung Khin Sint is serving a 20-year jail term for allegedly trying to disrupt the on-going constitution convention.

During his week-long visit, Yokota said he had seen many "encouraging changes" in regard to human rights.

He noted more than 2,000 political prisoners had been freed under an amnesty that began in April 1992, and there has since been a "general relaxation of the atmosphere" in Yangon that had made people more willing to talk to him.

The military authorities here also have become more open, and there is "some room for optimism" that this will further improve, Yokota said.

"I see clear signs of development, improvement in the city life (and) infrastructure," he added. "I see changes in a good way over the last one year."

But he said without elaborating that some restrictions still exist, particularly in regard to civil and political rights.

US urges parties in Lebanon to show restraint

WASHINGTON, Nov 17: The State Department urged all parties Tuesday to exercise restraint after guerrilla violence in southern Lebanon prompted reprisal air raids by Israel, reports Reuters.

In a written reply to a reporter's question, the Department blamed the flare-up on pro-Iranian guerrillas of the fundamentalist Hezbollah (party of god) who attacked Israeli and Israeli-affiliated outposts at dawn Tuesday.

"This violence is regrettable," the department said. "It reflects the need to make rapid progress in the Middle East peace process. It is yet another indication of Hezbollah opposition to peace."

"We call on all parties in the region to exercise restraint," it added.

Abdel-Rahman denies involvement in WTC bombing

NEW YORK, Nov 17: Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman denied Tuesday that he was involved in a series of bombings that included the World Trade Centre blast, and lashed out at the government informer who gathered evidence against him, reports AP.

"How can we conspire against America while the American people were very generous to us and they accepted us here," said Abdel-Rahman in a rare prison interview.

Abdel Rahman, 55, is a blind Muslim cleric accused of leading a 15-man group planning a series of murders, kidnappings and bombings that included the February 26 World Trade Centre blast that killed six people and injured more than 1,000.

Other bombings were allegedly planned at the United Nations, a Manhattan bridge and regional FBI offices.

The Sheikh said the US government created the conspiracy case, with the help of Emad Salem, formerly a top aide to the blind cleric who would guide him by the arm as they walked.

Abdel Rahman was given a US visa in Sudan and entered the United States in 1990.

UN suspends hunt for Aideed

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 17: The UN Security Council suspended Tuesday a hunt for Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed while an investigation is conducted into the killing of UN peacekeepers, reports AFP.

The US-sponsored resolution authorised an inquiry into attacks on UN peacekeepers, including the killing of 24 Pakistani UN troops on June 5. The Security Council ordered the arrest and trial of the culprits, including Aideed, after

that attack. The United States abandoned efforts to capture Aideed after losing 18 men in a battle on October 3.

UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali was to name a panel of judicial and military experts to comprise the commission as quickly as possible, said British UN ambassador Sir David Hamay.

"Our primary goal in Somalia is to foster a political dialogue which can lead to national reconciliation, said Na-

deine Albright, the US Ambassador to the United Nations. While the inquiry is made, the Security Council has decided to "suspend arrest actions against those individuals who might be implicated but are not currently detained", the resolution said.

Boutros-Ghali is also asked to "make appropriate provision to deal with the situation of those already detained."



Actor-comedian George Burns signs a contract Tuesday in which he agrees to play an engagement at Caesars Palace Hotel in Las Vegas on November 20, his 100th birthday. —AFP photo

'I don't believe in dying'

LOS ANGELES, Nov 17: George Burns says there's no money in dying, so he'll be playing Caesars Palace on his 100th birthday, reports AP.

"I don't believe in dying — I died in Altoona, I died in Schenectady — I'm not going to die again," the 97-year-old comedian joked at a news conference Tuesday in Century City.

Burns said he made a January 20, 1996, date for the Las Vegas resort and "I hope Caesars is still there."

Burns had once talked about playing the London Palladium on his 100th birthday.

Russian marines start leaving Georgian port

MOSCOW, Nov 17: The Russian marines stationed in the Georgian port of Poti since early November, at Georgia's request, began to withdraw Tuesday, according to Black Sea fleet officials cited by Russian news agencies, reports AFP.

A total of 750 Russian marines were to leave Poti Tuesday for their base in Sebastopol, and only two ships will remain in the port, according to fleet officials in Sebastopol quoted by Itar-Tass.

About 100 marines will stay behind, with the two ship, to assure the security of the city, the port and the territorial waters, fleet commander Admiral Eduard Baltin said, according to Interfax.

Jewish settlements emerging as daunting barrier to peace

JERUSALEM, Nov 17: For Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's government, the Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip are a bit like Frankenstein's monster rising to haunt his creator, reports AP.

Built to tighten Israel's grip on land won in war, the settlements are emerging as the biggest barrier to Rabin's plan to make peace with the Palestinians.

Ironically, it was Rabin who as chief of staff conquered the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 Middle East war. As prime minister from 1974 to 1977 and defence minister in the 1980s, he was responsible for establishing many settlements in areas that he felt were strategically important.

Settler leaders say the presence of the 144 settlements dotting West Bank hilltops and Gaza's coast will prevent any permanent land-for-peace deal.

"We are the real and only buffer to a Palestinian state because we are spread out all over," said Israel Harel, head of the council that represents the settlements in the occupied lands.

Many of the 125,000 settlers vehemently oppose the Israeli-PLO accord on Palestinian autonomy. Settlers repeatedly block roads with burning tires and rampaged through Palestinian towns in the past three weeks to protest the killings of two settlers and the wounding of another by Muslim militants.

The gunmen picked the settlers as targets apparently because they anticipated the sharp reaction that they hope will eventually derail the talks. At the same time, the settlers carefully orchestrated protests were a signal to the government that they have the ability to spoil any peace agreement.

Settlers have also threatened to shoot any Palestinian policeman on sight, claiming they would be acting in self-defence because he might be a disguised gunman. The police force is to be deployed in April under the autonomy agreement.

"If this is not just talk, if this is the real thing, Rabin will have to disarm the settlers, and this might be a test case," said Ehud Sprinkza, a lecturer at Hebrew University and author of a book on Israel's radical right.

So far, the government has backed away from confronting the settlers. Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said more troops were being sent into the occupied lands to meet settlers' demands for more security. But the army said the soldiers had new orders to deal firmly with any rampages.

The settlers have put Rabin in a political bind. They are making trouble just as he is trying to wrap up the autonomy agreement so he can press forward with negotiations with Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. But he can't crack down because TV images of soldiers clubbing rioting settlers will only erode support.

Pollsters say that while many Israelis feel the settlers have gone too far with their vigilante raids, there is also a consensus that the government has an obligation to protect them.

Each victim wins the settlers' fresh sympathy. "The pain," proclaimed a black-boxed banner headline in Israel's largest daily, Yedioth Ahronoth, last week after Gaza settler Ephraim Ayubi was gunned down in his car. Underneath was a photo of Mrs. Ayubi gently kissing the flag-draped body.

In an attempt to quiet the situation, Rabin met with settler leaders for the first time in a year and hinted he might restore some financial perks, such as cuts in income taxes, said Gad Ben-Ari, a spokesman for Rabin. Although settlements were started under Rabin in the

1970s, the big push in construction took place from 1990 to 1992 under the right-wing government of Yitzhak Shamir, which wanted to block any option for giving back land.

Today, Rabin sees the settlements in part as a trump card to bolster Israeli claims to parts of the West Bank when talks on the territories' final status begin two years from now.

The settlers themselves are not unified in their own strategy over whether talking to the government or fighting it will win them the best deal.

Rabin won't talk about his visions for peace, pledging only to leave settlements standing during the five-year period of autonomy.

Iran censures Amnesty report

NICOSIA, Nov 17: Tehran on Wednesday rebuffed an Amnesty International report on suspected Iranian death squads, suggesting the organisation has "a vendetta against Islamic Iran," reports AP.

Iran's denouncement came hours after the London-based human rights agency released a report which noted other reports of Iranian execution teams murdering dissidents abroad.

The Amnesty report listed cases in Germany, Turkey and France in which individuals with links to the Iranian government or secret service were implicated.

The group also condemned Tehran's practices at home of torture and unfair trial, excessive use of the death penalty.

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