

US against use of force to settle Spratlys dispute

MANILA, Dec 3: The United States has told the Philippines it will react to any security threat in the Asia-Pacific region and will oppose use of force to settle the Spratlys dispute...

De Villa, in an interview with the Manila Radio Station DZRH, did not say what specific action the United States would take in case regional security was threatened.

De Villa held talks with Pentagon officials last month during the US visit of Philippine President Fidel Ramos.

Delhi steps up security around Babri Mosque

AYODHYA, India, Dec 3: Indian security troops stepped up their vigil around the ruins of the Babri Mosque Thursday as Hindu extremists planned to launch celebrations to mark its demolition last year...

Some 1,500 paramilitary troops moved into this riverside pilgrimage town as activists of an outlawed Hindu organisation planned to kick off a week of celebrations on Monday to mark the anniversary of the shrine's demolition.

Soldiers with night-vision devices, water cannons and rifles patrolled Ayodhya, 700 kilometres (420 miles) from New Delhi...

Thousands of Hindu zealots razed the Moghul-built Babri Mosque, capping a virulent Hindu-revivalist drive against the disputed shrine...

A makeshift temple built hurriedly by the zealots stands atop the mounds of bricks from the collapsed Babri Mosque.

Right-wing Hindus believe that the demolished shrine was built in 1528 by Moghul emperor Babur after razing a temple to their coveted Hindu warrior-king Lord Rama.

All Hindus here will hold a second festival of lights on December 6, said Purshottam Narain Singh, former organising secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council)...

Hindus celebrate the annual festival in November to usher in prosperity, a good harvest and luck.

Singh, a firebrand Hindu leader, said the celebrations would begin exactly at the same time that the third dome of the brick-and-limestone shrine crashed a year ago.

He also said some 15,000 people would attend a meeting called Hindu awakening day on Monday.

More than 2,000 people died in the Hindu Muslim riots that swept across India after the demolition, which drew angry reactions from the Islamic world.

The BJP won 49 out of 70 seats in the Delhi Assembly, clearly trouncing Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao's Congress Party.

Delhi was one of five assemblies where the Congress was pitted against the BJP. The ruling party has scored outright victories in Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan States.

The BJP has staked a claim to form governments in the states of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh where the polls produced hung assemblies.

Khurana, sworn in by Delhi's Lieutenant Governor FK Dave, is the first Chief Minister of Delhi since the 1950s.

Reuter from Delhi adds:

Haitian PM holds talks with Aristide

WASHINGTON, Dec 3: Haitian Prime Minister Robert Malval met exiled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide Thursday and served notice he would stick to plans to quit later this month unless there was a breakthrough in the Haiti crisis...

Malval arrived at Aristide's apartment in the fashionable Georgetown neighbourhood of the US capital without saying a word to waiting reporters.

But US and Haitian sources said Malval wanted a make or break meeting to end a two-year-old political deadlock that has left the Haitian military in power.

Mother tells Jackson to defend allegations

WASHINGTON, Dec 3: Michael Jackson's mother urged her son Thursday to return to the United States and clear his name of allegations that he sexually molested a 13-year-old boy, reports AFP.

"You have to come home and defend yourself," Katherine Jackson said in a message to her 35-year-old son during a Cable News Network interview, adding "it seems like he's been judged before he's been tried."

She would not disclose where Jackson was but his brother, Jermaine, said they had spoken with him over the telephone four days ago and that the singer had told them; "I did not do this. I am completely innocent."

Jackson is facing a civil suit from a boy who claims he was molested by the performer. No criminal charges have been filed but authorities are investigating the case.

Jackson cut short his world tour last month while in Mexico, saying he needed treatment for what he called an addiction to painkillers.

Jackson's family criticised his defence team, saying they were not doing enough to shoot down all of the allegation which have been cropping up with the molestation story first broke.

The latest charge came when Jackson's chauffeur Gary Hearne said during questioning Tuesday that he had repeatedly taken the pop star to stay overnight at the boy's home.

A judge has ordered Jackson, who is believed to be in rehabilitation somewhere in Europe, to give a sworn deposition before January 31 on the civil suit.



South Korean opposition Democratic Party (DP) lawmakers forcefully close the mouth of Vice-Speaker of the National Assembly Hwang Nak-Joo on Thursday. The DP was trying successfully to block the ruling Democratic Liberal Party from railroading next year's budget bill through congress.

Lebanon fires 18000 civil servants

BEIRUT, Dec 3: The Lebanese government fired 18000 civil servants for chronic absenteeism as part of a plan to overhaul the state administration, reports Reuter.

There are 18000 employees in the various state sectors whose services have been terminated on the basis that they are absentees.

Prime Minister Rafik Al-Hariri told reporters after a cabinet meeting late on Thursday.

"They were dismissed in line with the law stipulating that any employee absent from his work should not remain in it," added Hariri, who earlier this week announced a purge of 500 public workers accused of corruption.

The cabinet also decided that 1,500 civil servants considered incompetent or superfluous would undergo retraining before being transferred to public sectors with manpower shortages.

Off the Record

Battle to rebuild face: SHEFFIELD, England: A British student had half his nose and part of his cheek bitten off during a street fight following an argument, police said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

Plastic surgeons in the northern English town of Sheffield battled to rebuild the student's face after failing to stitch back the missing parts.

"People biting off ears and noses is quite common these days, but I have never seen it to this extent," said police inspector David Cannon.

Man bites dog: WELLINGTON: A man bit off the tip of a police dog's ear on Thursday and received a bite in the testicles in return, reports Reuter.

Police dog handler constable Laurie McNeal said he had sent his dog Tyke into a house in Timaru, in New Zealand's south island, to disarm a man carrying a gun.

Tyke gripped the man's arm with his teeth and the offender reacted by biting off part of the dog's ear, McNeal said. Tyke responded by releasing his grip on the arm and biting the man's testicles, ending the one-sided dispute quickly.

Police said Tyke was expected back on full duties shortly. The conditions of the man was unknown. The offender has been charged with obstructing police and cruelty to an animal.



PARIS: Jill Barad, President of Mattel INC, presents on Wednesday a wax model of Barbie, on the doll's 35th anniversary. The wax Barbie will be placed in the Grevin museum, dressed by Christian Dior coiffed by Alexandre.

Libya wants trial of Reagan Thatcher for '86 raid

TRIPOLI, Dec 3: Libya threatened Thursday to quit the United Nations if former US President Ronald Reagan and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher are not put on trial for a 1986 raid on Libya, reports AFP.

If the Security Council manages to prosecute these criminal terrorists and punish them for causing the deaths of several people, Libya will admit that its position (towards the UN) was wrong.

The article appeared in a special edition to mark stiffer UN sanctions which took effect on Wednesday after Tripoli's continued refusal to handover two suspects in the bombing of a US airliner over Scotland in 1988.

On the other hand, the oppressed people who have no right of veto (in the security council) will have to find an organisation other than the United Nations.

In a letter to UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Libyan Foreign Minister Omar Al-Muntasser accused the United States of a policy of aggression against Libya since the 1980s.

This policy, the Foreign Minister said, "is expressed... through outright unprecedented acts of piracy, such as the one organised by the Bush Administration, which took Libyan prisoners from Chad and brought them to the United States to train them in sabotage in preparation for terrorist acts to be directed against their own country."

"We have material proof to support these claims," the letter said.

"Instead of cooperating with Interpol and arresting these terrorists, the American Administration is providing them with the means for taking action against their country and their people," the Foreign Minister added.

The United States has put Libya on its list of nations that support terrorism, put an embargo on trade with the African nation and frozen Libyan government assets in US banks.

Iran denies treaty with DPRK

An Iranian political source in Tehran yesterday categorically denied media reports on the conclusion of a long-range missile test treaty between Iran and the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK), Xinhua report from Tehran.

Some western media said that the DPRK would sell long-range Scud missiles to Tehran and would make a testing of the No Dong-1 in Iran.

The Iranian source said that Tehran and Pyongyang have not signed any contract on testing or purchase of long-range missiles, saying that bringing up of such issues aims to intrigue regional states, the rich Arab states in particular, to purchase more western arms.

Jailed Chinese newsman awarded: Jailed Chinese journalist Wang Juntao was Thursday awarded the 1993 prize of the Association Reporters Sans Frontiers (reporters without frontiers), AFP reports from Paris.

Wang, editor of the banned Economic Weekly, is serving a 13-year-jail term for his activities during the Beijing Spring. The prize will be handed to his wife, Hou Xiantian, here on International human rights day on December 10.

Ship found in Bulgaria beach: Bulgarian naval officers on Thursday found a 5,000-tonne ship washed up on a beach with no sign of the crew or survivors, marine officials said, Reuter reports from Varna, Bulgaria.

Officials said the Voigo-Balt 38 freighter may have been caught in a severe storm on Wednesday night but they had received no emergency signals.

The ship was found on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast 80 KM (50 miles) north of Varna, said duty officer Andrei Andreev of the Marine Emergency Coordinating Service. An emergency team had gone to check on any cargo and try to find the captain's log.

Typhoon claims 106 in Vietnam: Typhoon Kyle killed at least 106 people when it lashed the central Vietnam coast last week, the government owned Vietnam News reported on Friday, Reuter says from Hanoi.

Another 29 people in Khanh Hoa, the worst-hit province, were still missing and 31 were injured by the storm, which left damage estimated at 11.5 billion, the newspaper said.

Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet has allocated six billion dong (600,000 dollar) in relief funds.

Spaniard killed in Algeria: Islamic militants killed a Spaniard in Algeria on Thursday, a day after fundamentalists had set a deadline for foreigners to leave the country, the official APS news agency said, Reuter reports from Algiers.

The Spaniard was killed by a terrorist group, the Algerian term used to denote Islamic militants, as he drove his car on a road about 85 KM (50 miles) southwest of the capital Algiers, APS said.

2 shot dead in California: A man shot several people in a state unemployment office Thursday, then killed a police officer, authorities said. He fled to a neighbouring city and was shot to death by an officer, AP reports from Oxnard, California.

Hospitals received five shooting victims. An Oxnard police officer was killed while pursuing the gunman following the office shooting, Ventura police Lt. Don Arth said.

The gunman fled to Ventura, where he was shot and killed by police, said officer Kelly Dean.

UN monitor opposes quick lifting of sanctions on Iraq

WASHINGTON, Dec 3: The UN official responsible for monitoring Iraqi weapons programmes cautioned Thursday against moving too quickly to lift the oil embargo and other sanctions against Saddam Hussein's government, reports AP.

Rolf Ekeus, whose commission is charged with determining whether Iraq has eliminated weapons of mass destruction, said at least six months will be needed to conclude whether Iraq is complying with its promise November 26 to allow long-term monitoring of weapons facilities.

Ekeus, addressing group at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, attributed Iraq's concession to the economic pressures caused by the two-year economic sanctions, especially the embargo against Iraqi oil exports.

Hosokawa apologises

TOKYO, Dec 3: Japan's Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa apologised today for political disorder in the resignation Thursday of Defence Chief Keisuke Nakanishi, bringing dissonance to the coalition government, reports AFP.

"I apologise for any confusion in the committee following the statement by former defence agency chief Nakanishi," Hosokawa told a parliament budget committee, which was stalled Thursday over Nakanishi's remarks.

Nakanishi resigned Thursday after coming under fire for reportedly suggesting a day earlier that the constitution, crafted in the aftermath of World War II, be changed in order to let the Japanese military play a role on the world stage.

Coalition members and the opposition heavily criticised his remarks.

Hosokawa appointed moderate politician Kazuo Aichi as new defence chief late Thursday.

Clinton starts Europe tour on Jan 9

WASHINGTON, Dec 3: President Bill Clinton, who has not yet made an official trip to Europe since taking office, will visit Europe three times in the first half of next year, the White House said Thursday, reports AFP.

Clinton will visit Brussels on January 9 to discuss relations between Washington and Europe, White House spokesman Dee Dee Myers said.

He will attend the NATO summit in Brussels on January 10 and 11, before meeting with EC leaders. He will then meet with Eastern European heads of state in Prague.

Clinton is to visit Moscow between January 12-15, then Belarus, which has ratified the START I treaty on strategic nuclear weapons reduction and the Nuclear-Non Proliferation Treaty, Myers said.

Hundreds mourn victims of Bhopal disaster

BHOPAL, India, Dec 3: An 18-year-old girl, coughing incessantly, struggles toward a straw-and-rag effigy of a man in a black suit and hat. After staring at it for a moment, she suddenly kicks it, and the 300 people standing around her begin cheering, reports AP.

Within moments they pounce on the rag doll, intended to be American businessman Warren Anderson, and rip it into tatters.

Someone sets a match to it, and the dry straw crackles as the mourners clap their hands. So began the protest Friday marking the ninth anniversary of the day poisonous gas spewed out of the Union Carbide's pesticide plant in Bhopal, killing more than 4,000 people and maiming another

20,000 in the world's worst industrial disaster.

The anger against the US company hasn't died out in this central Indian city, and many of the victims are still penniless.

They have received little financial compensation, even after 17 courts have heard seemingly endless arguments on the 40,000 death claims. They have settled 1,000 so far.

Nine years after funneling more than 75 million dollar into relief, hospitals are still overcrowded; widows of the victims are yet to get the houses the government promised them.

On Friday, the 300 demonstrators gathered in front of the pesticide factory, which was abandoned after the disaster.

"Down with Carbide!" they shouted before burning the effigy of Anderson, who was the chief executive of Union Carbide when the gas leaked out on the night of December 3, 1984.

Rehana Sultana, who led the demonstration, was a 9-year-old girl living in a straw hut outside the factory when the deadly methylisocyanate gas leaked out. Even though she was lucky to survive, she has been weak ever since.

Recently doctors found that she was suffering from tuberculosis. They say she may have contracted the disease because her immune system was weakened by the methylisocyanate poisoning.

She said she has spent nearly all of the 200 rupees (dhs 6) she receives a month to buy medicine. "Government hospitals that are supposed to dispense medicines never have any," she said.

Sudanese Islamic leader Dr Hassan Al-Turabi (L) listens to Bosnia's mufti, Sheikh Mustafa Cerchic during the opening session of the Islamic conference on Thursday hosted by Sudan for the second time in as many years.



IRA has never offered permanent ceasefire

BELFAST, Northern Ireland, Dec 3: The Irish Republican Army has never offered a permanent ceasefire as a condition for negotiations and never will, its supporters said Thursday in a direct rebuke to British claims about secret contacts, reports AP.

"They say that Irish republicans are ready to surrender. That is a lie," Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein, told a Belfast press conference. "Our commitment to struggle is firm and undaunted."

That defiant message only added to the difficulties facing Irish leader Albert Reynolds and British Prime Minister John Major as they meet Friday in Dublin to seek agreement on principles for bringing peace to Northern Ireland.