

Palestinian groups urged to take part in democratic talks

TUNIS, Jan 8: The PLO leadership on Friday urged all Palestinian factions to bury the hatchet and start a broad dialogue ahead of autonomy in the Israeli-occupied territories, reports AFP.

The PLO's executive committee said factions in the territories and abroad should rally around a "common denominator" as their "first national authority in modern history" was becoming a reality.

In a statement published by the Palestinian news agency Wafa, it said they could work to recover completely their "inalienable rights of return, self-determination and an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital."

"Join hands to build our national entity... and let love guide our behaviour and our relations," the executive committee statement said.

But 10 hardline Palestinian

groups, including several PLO factions, on Wednesday set up a united leadership in Damascus to defeat the September autonomy accord and also agreed to boycott elections after self-rule begins.

The executive committee, meeting since Sunday under the chairmanship of PLO chief Yasser Arafat, also hailed an initiative by a delegation of leading Palestinians who had asked for democracy in the PLO and a Palestinian dialogue.

The executive body of the Palestine Liberation Organisation confirmed its "attachment to the principle of democratic dialogue, political pluralism, freedom of thought and the practice of democracy."

The pro-democracy lobby, headed by Haidar Abdel Shafi, said Thursday it had failed to curb Arafat's "monopoly" on decision-making in the peace negotiations with Israel.

UN condemns bombardment of Sarajevo

UK, France and Canada threaten to withdraw peacekeepers

ZAGREB, Jan 8: Several leading contributors to the 29,000-strong UN protection force (UNPROFOR) in the former Yugoslavia have warned they could consider withdrawing their contingents, reports AFP.

Britain, France and Canada, among the largest participants in UNPROFOR, have all threatened to review their involvement if there is no forthcoming solution to the war raging in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Troops have been provided by 22 countries and are divided into 41 national and multinational contingents, based in about 30 places.

About 25,600 are soldiers, 570 are military observers, 670 are unarmed civilian police, and 2,140 civilian and administrative staff.

Another 30 administrators and civilian police are based in

the Serbian capital Belgrade.

About 15,400 troops are based in Croatia in four sectors under the control of separatist Croat Serb forces from the Krajina area. A further 12,400 are in Bosnia, and 1,120 are serving in Macedonia.

Initially UNPROFOR was set up under a UN Security Council resolution in February 1992 that envisaged the deployment of 10,000 men in Croatia.

Now a further 2,800 soldiers are expected to arrive in Bosnia by the end of February as part of UN resolution 83 to protect the six Muslim enclaves designated UN safe areas, the United Nations said Thursday in New York.

Rotations, new deployments and delays in sending relief troops means the actual number of personnel on the ground

varies weekly.

France has supplied 5,500 personnel to UNPROFOR, two-thirds of whom are deployed in Bosnia. Britain has 2,200 men in the force, Jordan 1,850, Canada 1,800, Spain 1,180, Denmark 1,150 and Belgium 1,014 and about 20 observers.

Reuter adds: The UN Security Council condemned Bosnian Serbs' ceaseless pounding of Sarajevo and diplomats urged the Serbian president to persuade them to stop shelling and get back to peace talks.

Serb-Muslim fighting in the besieged city on Friday killed six people and wounded 27, hospital and Serb sources said.

At the United Nations, the Security Council, in a formal meeting, condemned "the continuing military pressure on Sarajevo and the relentless

bombardment of the city by Bosnian Serb forces."

The council's statement late on Friday came after Russia elicited a report from UN officials that Bosnian Muslims had helped provoke the bombardments by shelling Serb districts.

But undersecretary-general Chinmaya Gharekhan, a close aide to Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, told council members that the Serb response was out of all proportion to any provocation, according to diplomats at his briefing.

Shortly before the meeting, Britain's UN ambassador, Sir David Hannay, said US and British envoys in Belgrade told Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic the "bombing was totally unproductive," and there should be a return to negotiating a settlement.

Off the Record

Wearing cap backward a sign of gang affiliation

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas: While many consider it fashionable to wear a cap backward, Sunrise Mall and law enforcement officials say they're a sign of gang affiliation, reports AP.

So they've banned the practice, one of several measures the shopping mall has initiated in an attempt to curb gang violence and other crime.

"When they first told me I had to turn my cap around I tripped out," said 19-year-old Ernest Guerra. "I've worn my cap backward so long I don't feel comfortable wearing it any other way."

"I'd rather have parents be upset at me than to ask me why I let their kids be shot at the mall," said Scott Mandel, Sunrise Mall security director.

A clash between two groups of young people at a mall in the Dallas suburb of Irving last month resulted in a bystander being fatally shot and two members of one of the groups suffering gunshot wounds.

At the Padre Staples Mall, manager Jim Baxter said his mall doesn't have a dress code, adding: "Anyone with blue hair and a bone in their nose can come here. We love their money. We're more concerned with how people conduct themselves."

'Children will fight back'

LOS ANGELES: A 13-year-old girl was awarded more than two million dollars Friday in a civil lawsuit filed against her godfather accusing him of sexually molesting her, reports Reuter.

In one of the first judgments of its kind, a judge ordered Richard Streatie, who had pleaded guilty to molestation and is now in prison, to pay the girl one million dollars in general damages, one million dollar in punitive damages and 36,000 dollars for medical costs.

"The message to those who would abuse children is that 'Children will not be silent and will fight back,'" said Gloria Allred, the child's attorney.

The 13-year-old had accused Streatie, 30, of molesting her in July 1990 while she was spending the night with his daughter in the Los Angeles suburb of Little Rock and of trying to molest her again when she slept over about a year later.

After the second incident the girl phoned her father, Streatie's closest friend since childhood, and told him what had happened. But when he confronted Streatie with the accusations, he denied it and the father did not press the issue.

But the girl's mother, who had been divorced from the father since their daughter was an infant, reported Streatie to local police.

Chelsea's Socks may come back upstairs as a mouser

WASHINGTON: First cat, Socks, banished to the White House basement for clawing President Clinton's furniture, could soon be getting a warm welcome back upstairs — as a mouser, reports Reuter.

It seems Christmas trees and holiday plants attracted thousands of visitors to the White House last month and, unfortunately, a small army of mice.

According to White House chief Usher Gary Walters, an undetermined number of mice were able to hitch a ride into the executive mansion on the holiday trees and plants as they were being brought in as decorations.

The White House was put on alert for the creatures after sightings soared, startling staff members, particularly those located near the press office and briefing room where the rodents are concentrated.

Walters said the mice generally enter the White House when "we bring in live plant material that's been kept out in the open from time to time, and we just got finished with 14 Christmas trees."

The mice are not believed to have caused any harm to the White House structure.

Socks, the cat the Clintons' daughter Chelsea brought with her to the White House from Arkansas last year, was banished to the basement last month, after apparently sharpening his claws on the Clintons' new furniture.

Mourners pay last respects to Clinton's mother

HOT SPRINGS (Ark), Jan 8: Hundreds of mourners, from neighbours to friends to top administration officials to entertainer Barbra Streisand, were joining President Clinton in paying final respects to his mother Saturday, reports AP.

After the morning funeral for Virginia Kelley, the president was joining a procession for the 90-mile (145-km) drive to his birthplace of Hope, Ark. where Kelley was being buried among the graves of other family members.

Clinton was expected to return to Washington late Saturday night to begin a scheduled 10-day European trip.

Because of the number of those expected to attend — several thousand — the funeral was being held in the Hot Springs Convention auditorium instead of a church. Three Methodist ministers close to Kelley were conducting the services.

Kelley died in her sleep Thursday after a long battle with breast cancer. She was 70.

Just last week, the president's mother jetted to Las Vegas with her husband, Richard, to enjoy a Streisand concert.



US President Bill Clinton (R) comforts his half-brother Roger Clinton Jr. after their private visit to pay respects to their mother Virginia Kelley. Memorial services were held yesterday with burial in Hope, Arkansas. — AFP photo

4 killed in US plane crash

COLUMBUS (Ohio), Jan 8: A twin-engine commuter plane crashed into two buildings Friday night, killing at least four people and injuring three family members, reports AP.

One person also believed to be on the plane was unaccounted for, Columbus Fire Lt. Kent Searle said Saturday.

The United Express plane, which can carry at least 29 passengers, was coming from Dulles International Airport near Washington, DC, and was on approach to land at Port Columbus International Airport.

The plane was carrying five passengers and three crewmen, State Highway Patrol Trooper Craig Seitz said. It hit the ground about 300 feet (100 meters) from one of the buildings in a wooded area, cartwheeled into a building and caught fire, Seitz said.

The Federal Aviation Administration was on the scene. The National Transportation Safety Board officials were on their way.

A 5-year-old girl and her parents were in stable condition at Mount Carmel East Hospital, said spokesman Mark Hopkins. They were not immediately identified.

They were only slightly injured and walked away from the crash, Jefferson Township Fire Chief William Henestofel said.

Temporary ceasefire goes into effect in Afghanistan

KABUL, Jan 8: A temporary ceasefire in Kabul went into effect early today after a week of death and devastation, triggering a mass exodus and enabling foreign mission staff to leave, reports AP.

Hundreds of thousands of people, traumatized by the ferocious week-long fighting, were fleeing north and east from Kabul, where an estimated three million people continue to live, witnesses said.

A 24-hour break in hostilities, agreed to by the main combatants in response to a

Pakistan government appeal, appeared to be holding after guns fell silent.

The seven days of artillery and rocket attacks and aerial bombing by the Afghan rivals have left hundreds dead and more than 3,000 people injured, with hospitals full to overflowing.

The power struggle was launched by the combined forces of Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostam and Afghan Premier Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, battling to end President Burhanuddin Rabbani's 18-

month rule.

The embassies of Pakistan, Turkey and Libya were evacuating all their staff leaving, diplomats said.

The evacuees will travel on buses along the eastern highway to the Pakistan border along with the UN's foreign staff in Kabul, they said.

The Indonesian, Iranian and Saudi Arabian embassies were also partly evacuated, sources said.

Diplomatic sources in Pakistan said the ceasefire could be extended for a further 24 hours.

Panama's ruling coalition dissolved

PANAMA CITY, Jan 8: Panama's ruling coalition was dissolved Friday after its three member parties failed to reach agreement on a presidential candidate for the May 8 election, party officials said, reports AP.

A statement issued by President Guillermo Endara's Arnulfista party said it had broken its alliance with the authentic Liberal Party and the Liberal Republican Nationalist Movement (Molirena).

The Arnulfista party said it would consider other alliances that would back its candidate, Mireya Moscoso.

Three injured in Karachi bomb blast

KARACHI (Pakistan), Jan 8: A powerful homemade bomb exploded today at the city court in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi, wounding three people, including a policeman, police said, reports Reuter.

"We don't know the motive behind the explosion," one police officer said. "We are investigating."

One police constable and two other men had been admitted to hospital, one with serious injuries, doctors said.

The blast damaged at least 12 motorcycles in the parking lot of the court reserved for officials cars, police said.

Official sources said three people had been detained.



Bomb disposal experts inspect destroyed motorcycles scattered around the district courts parking lot in Karachi yesterday. A powerful bomb ripped through the area, destroying several cars and bikes. No further details were immediately available. — AFP photo

Hurd reassures Lockerbie suspects of fair trial

VALLETTA, Jan 8: British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd sought on Friday to reassure two Libyans accused of the Lockerbie bombing that they would get a fair trial, reports Reuter.

Speaking in Malta, Hurd said Libya should hand the two men over, confident they would get justice.

"We have been at pains to explain to the Libyans the nature of justice in Scotland, the nature of a fair trial, the rights of defendants," Hurd, who was visiting Malta on the way back from a trip to the Middle East, told a news conference.

Police have traced back to a shop in Malta, the suitcase containing the bomb which blew up Pan Am Flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie in December 1988, killing 270 people.

Britain and the United States have accused Abdel Baset Ali Mohamed Al-Megrahi and Al-Amin Khalifa Fhimah of planting the bomb and the UN has slapped sanctions on Libya because of its refusal to hand over the two men.

Hurd said any doubts Libya may have had about the nature of a fair trial should be now have been removed.

"We believe that this should be a fair trial and that this is the right way to proceed," he added.

Hurd, who thanked Malta for cooperating with the investigation, said the attempt to bring the Libyans to trial was not aimed at undermining Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

"We are not involved in seeking to destabilise or change the government of Libya. That is not a matter for us. That is a matter for them," he said.

"We are deeply committed, as is the Security Council of the United Nations to securing justice as a result of this terrorist tragedy," Hurd added.

Soyuz-TM 18 blasts off

MOSCOW, Jan 8: The Russian space craft Soyuz TM 18 blasted off from the Baikonur space center in Kazakhstan today with a three-member crew who will try to break the record for the longest stay in space.

The blast-off at 4:08 PM (1008 GMT) was shown live on television.

The three cosmonauts are Viktor Afanasyev, Yuri Usachov and Valery Polyakov, who is doctor.

Polyakov, who has already stayed 241 days in orbit during a mission that began in 1988 and ended in 1989, will attempt to stay in orbit for 427 days — more than 14 months, which if successful will dwarf the previous record of 366 days set by Russian Cosmonaut Musa Manarov in 1987-88.

Afanasyev and Usachov are scheduled to remain in orbit 179 days, until July 4, the Itar-Tass news agency said.

Soyuz-TM 18 should dock Monday with the orbiting Mir space station, where the three Russian cosmonauts will join their colleagues Vassili Tsiblyev and Alexander Serebrov.

Cambodian troops march on key Khmer Rouge base

PHNOM PENH (Cambodia), Jan 8: More than 1,000 government troops were marching Saturday on a key Khmer Rouge base in the largest attack against the guerrilla group since a new government was elected in May, senior officials said Saturday, reports AP.

The Khmer Rouge have been resisting the attack that began Thursday. It was unclear if or when the troops would be able to capture the munitions base of Anlong Veng in northwestern Cambodia along the Thai border, said the government officials, who demanded anonymity.

India reduces troops around Hazratbal

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 8: Indian border guards today reduced their presence around the Hazratbal Mosque here following demands by Kashmiri Muslim religious leaders, officials and witnesses said, reports AP.

The partial withdrawal by Border Security Force (BSF) troops came two days before a threatened strike by Kashmiri secessionists to protest their presence around the mosque, the subcontinent's holiest Islamic shrine.

Witnesses said local police replaced the BSF in four out of a dozen bunkers set up after Muslim militants holed up in the white marble complex sur-

rendered on November 16 after a month-long army siege of the mosque.

Angry residents of the neighbourhood staged street protests, shouting pro-independence and Islamic slogans, today to protest the continuing presence of the BSF, witnesses said.

The demonstrators were pacified by senior police officers.

A single hair believed to come from the beard of the Prophet Mohammad (SM) is preserved inside the mosque, where Muslims have not offered prayers since the end to the army siege to protest BSF deployment.

Malaysia to teach technical subjects in English

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 8: Malaysia will go ahead with plans to teach technical subjects in English at universities despite opposition from ethnic Malay intellectuals. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said today, reports Reuter.

"We stand by our decision to teach technical subjects in English," he told reporters after a supreme council meeting of his ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).

Scores of houses burnt as bushfires rage in Sydney's suburbs

SYDNEY, Jan 8: Forest fires raged in the suburbs of Australia's largest city Saturday killing a fourth person and setting ablaze scores of houses, reports AP.

Police arrested 11 suspected arsonists amid claims that more than half the fires were deliberately set.

The Bushfire Services Commission said the fourth victim, a 37-year-old woman, died when a firestorm overran her home in Jannali, a southern suburb of Sydney.

Her two children, aged 8 and 12, were badly burned. Unconfirmed reports said the three had tried to shelter from the flames in their swimming

pool. No further details were immediately available and there are fears of more deaths.

Three men, two of them firefighters, died earlier in the week when the crisis began.

Scenes in Australian's biggest city were chaotic with fires ringing its outskirts and raging in several suburbs some only 8 kilometres (5 miles) from downtown. Sydney has a population of 3.6 million.

Police are patrolling burned out areas following reports of looters.

A huge pall of brown smoke plunged the city into gloom, triggering automatic street lights hours before sunset.

Smoke could be smelt all over.

The shells of the landmark harbourside Opera House, which normally are a bright and shiny white in sunshine, were a dull orange.

Residents described fireballs and swirling winds carrying glowing cinders which started new outbreaks. Many volunteered to beat back the blazes.

"A wall of flames raced over our heads," said one wildlife officer Andrew Marsden.

Firefighters said some houses exploded after catching fire.

"The situation is changing by the minute. It's a huge disaster and it is getting worse," said

department spokesman Kalcorn Osofrot.

Unconfirmed reports said more than 100 houses were on fire. Thousands have been evacuated and hundreds treated for burns and smoke inhalation.

Overall more than 125 forest fires blazed wildly across New South Wales state. Police believe many of the fires were deliberately lit and two teenagers have been arrested.

The government has posted a 100,000 dollar (68,000 dollar) reward.

Police received 850 calls from people claiming to have seen arsonists.

Residents living many kilo-

metres (miles) away from the fires reported ash and soot landing on their homes and cars.

Electricity and telephones were cut in many suburbs. Meanwhile, the Sydney Water has asked residents not to waste water which they say is need for fire fighting.

The fires were fanned by strong hot winds gusting to over 100 kilometres per hour (60 miles per hour). Meteorologists hoped a nighttime windshift will ease condition.

Bushfire Service Department commissioner Phil Koperberg said it was the biggest fire emergency recorded since European colonisation 200

years ago.

"We are dealing now with a geographical spread of fire which has not been experienced in this country since settlement," he said.

More than 500,000 hectares (1.2 million acres) of forest and grassland were scorched and much more is expected to be burned before the night is over.

As some fires were contained, attention turned to the rugged and tinder dry Blue Mountains, 80 kilometres (50 miles) west of the city, where a firestorm several kilometres (miles) long was slicing across dense forest threatening three small towns.