

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.

BRIEFLY

5 Indian policemen jailed:

In a rare judgment, a New Delhi court sentenced five policemen to five years or hard labour for torturing a teenage suspect who died shortly after being arrested, AP reports from New Delhi.

Judge Dinesh Dayal issued the ruling on Friday after the case dragged on for 15 years.

"This surely is milestone in protecting human rights and discouraging police from torturing suspects in custody," said Vijay Kumar Malhotra, a former member of Parliament who pursued the case after the parents of the victim approached him.

Students stage sit-in in Taiwan: About 40 students held a sit-in for a second straight day Saturday at Taiwan's largest university to protest against compulsory military courses, AP reports from Taipei.

The protesters at National Taiwan University, carrying banners that read 'University Democracy,' said they should have the right to reject military courses following the lifting of martial law in 1987.

The Nationalist Chinese fled to Taiwan in 1949 after losing a civil war on the mainland to the communists.

Japanese FM in Beijing: Japanese Foreign Minister Tsutomu Hata arrived in Beijing yesterday for talks with Chinese leaders expected to range from North Korea's nuclear ambitions to Japan's development aid to China, Reuter reports from Beijing.

Hata and his delegation touched down at Beijing airport and were driven to the downtown Diaoyutai state guesthouse for a meeting with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, their third since Japan's coalition government took power last August.

Hata was also due to hold talks with premier Li Peng and Jiang Zemin, China's Communist Party chief and president, and host a news conference during his two-day stay, officials said.

Stamps in honour of Satyajit: A special commemorative set of two stamps would be issued by the Department of Posts in the honour of film maestro Satyajit Ray on January 11, PTI reports from Calcutta.

The set of stamps would depict in one part a portrait of Calcutta. Satyajit Ray along with the Oscar which he was awarded for lifetime achievement and in the other part, a scene from his first film, "Pather Panchali," according to an official press release.

This set of stamps will be unique in the history of Indian postage stamp while its size will have apparent relevance for films.

Storm toll now 29 in Philippines:

Soldiers and volunteers intensified their search Saturday for 25 missing persons after the first storm to hit the Philippines this year killed 29 people, officials said, AP reports from Manila.

Renato Arevalo, regional director of the Office of Civil Affairs, said the hardest hit area was the town of Manito in Albay Province, where the storm caused 15 landslides, killing at least 22 people. Twenty others were missing.

Manito is about 350 kilometers (220 miles) southeast of Manila.

Arevalo said a 7-year-old drowned in Albay's capital of Legaspi and six people died in nearby Sorsogon province.

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 AFP.

The partial withdrawal by Border Security Force (BSF) troopers 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.

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