

US executing innocent people under death penalty: Amnesty

LONDON, Jan 14: The human rights group Amnesty International today accused the United States of executing innocent and mentally ill people under a death penalty which it said was arbitrary, racist and more expensive than imprisonment, reports Reuters.

Amnesty said it had written to President Bill Clinton calling for an urgent presidential commission into the use of the death penalty, which it has always opposed.

With slim prospects of persuading the US government to outlaw executions, the London-based pressure group instead highlighted various key problems in the way the penalty was used.

One death-row man was cleared last year but other innocent people had gone to the electric chair, Amnesty said, and it criticised the US for ex-

ecuting people in the last five years for crimes committed when they were still minors under 18.

The only other countries in the world to do this were Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Amnesty said among its most shocking findings were what it called the ingrained racism of the death penalty.

Figures speak for themselves: 40 per cent of death row prisoners are black compared to just 12 per cent of the population," it said in a statement.

"And an astonishing 84 per cent of prisoners executed since 1977 were convicted of murdering white victims — although black and white people are murdered in roughly equal numbers."

Amnesty said treatment of mentally ill or impaired prisoners was equally shocking, with more than 50 executed since 1982.

"Among them was Nollie Martin, who spent his 13 years on death row rocking back and forth on the floor of his cell. His symptoms were so severe he needed constant medication, he hallucinated and mutilated himself constantly."

"Nevertheless he was executed in May 1992."

Amnesty said its open letter to Clinton also contained persuasive practical reasons for abolishing state executions.

"It currently costs 2 million to 3 million dollars for each execution, more than three times the cost of keeping a prisoner behind bars for 40 years." Most of this represents legal costs from appeals which often last years.



Afghan Premier Gulbuddin Hekmatyar addresses a press conference at his headquarters in Chahar Siab, south of Kabul in Afghanistan Jan 12. Hekmatyar, the arch rival of Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, said that the only solution of this war is the immediate resignation of the president. — AFP photo

Artillery duel rends Kabul

KABUL, Jan 14: Afghan state and rival faction jets bombed each other's positions in Kabul today, prior to a fierce artillery duel that raged four hours non-stop in the eastern suburbs of the capital, reports AFP.

Lone jets of rival faction leader, ex-communist General Abdul Rashid Dostum made at least three sorties over Kabul Friday. Shortly after midnight, and around 5.00 AM and 8.30 AM local time — while a state jet was said to have bombed Dostum bases at 9.30 AM.

A lone jet again circled Kabul at 2.00 PM and 3.00 PM but with the prevailing artillery

bombardment it was difficult to tell which faction it belonged to, and where it dropped its bomb load.

In the night time Dostum raids the Kabul sky was illuminated by streaming arcs of scarlet tracer fire as Defence Ministry anti-aircraft guns sprayed cannon shells at the attacker, which at midnight locals say dropped a deadly cluster-bomb on the dormant capital.

The ministry duty officer at Kabul Airport said the Dostum jet raids were not effective against bases manned by forces loyal to President Burhanuddin

Rabbani.

"These raids are designed to weaken the moral of the civilians. They cannot inflict heavy casualties on our military forces," said duty officer General Mohammad Sawar Ayubzai.

A Russian-trained jet pilot himself, General Ayubzai claimed Dostum's main airbases in Mazar-i-Sharif and Shebarghan in northern Afghanistan had been knocked out by pro-Rabbani jets.

He said Dostum had only two or three Russian-made Sukhoi SU-22 jets that were operational, and which take off from a makeshift desert run-

Oman's Sultan calls for birth control

MUSCAT, Jan 14: Omani ruler Sultan Qaboos has called for birth control to slow down the country's population growth, which stands at 3.5 per cent per year, newspapers reported Thursday, says AFP.

The Sultan is the first Gulf Arab leader to openly encourage family planning.

Speaking on his annual tour of the provinces, the Sultan called on Omanis to "consider the planning of the family unit," which averages seven members as opposed to five around the world.

"So long as the means are available and not prohibited by religion, it is important to use them to preserve the Omani family," he said.

Sultan Qaboos plea follows the December publication of the results of the country's first census which found that 2,017,591 people live in Oman, 26 per cent of them foreigners.

Off the Record

Dentist pays for her own killing

ATHENS: A 40-year-old Athens dentist paid for her own killing because she believed she was incapable of committing suicide, police said here Thursday, reports AFP.

Georgia Vangelia-Spiroulis, who believed her husband was having an affair, paid a 38-year-old parking employee to kill her, according to the police who have arrested the man.

The victim, shot three-times in the back on Tuesday, reportedly provided the alleged killer with the weapon and spent several weeks talking him into killing her.

Vangelia-Spiroulis had told both her mother and psychologist she intended paying someone to kill her.

Police said the alleged murderer tried 10 times in as many days to do away with the victim in several isolated spots, before finally shooting her some way out of town.

Drinking session ends in bloodshed

CEBU (Philippines): A drinking session ended in bloodshed when a construction worker went berserk, hacking two friends to death before police shot him in the legs to subdue him, a spokeswoman in this central Philippines city said Friday, reports AFP.

Alfredo Naquila, 31, a construction worker in the neighbouring island of Bohol, was drinking with two friends when he suddenly went into a rage, seized a machete and hacked them to death, senior inspector Marietta Aguirre said.

Police arrived but Naquila refused to surrender and attacked them, forcing police to shoot him four times in the legs. He was taken to Bohol hospital.

Chinese cannibal executed

BEIJING: Chinese police have tracked down a man who killed eight persons and ate the brains of two of his victims, the Heilongjiang Legal News said, reports AFP.

Hao Kai, 34, a former prisoner released on parole who turned his talents to selling mutton kebabs began his bloody crimes in February 1993 in Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province, it said.

He strangled a prostitute, cut her body up into pieces, opened up her skull and ate her brains but did not find the meal to his liking, the paper said in its latest edition, received here today.

A worker on Hao's kebab stall had the misfortune to happen upon the grisly find just two hours later and was also stabbed to death.

Over the next nine months, the cannibal went on a killing spree, slaying six other people, including his wife. Each of them was chopped into pieces.

His last victim was a friend from whom he wanted to borrow money, Heilongjiang Legal News said.

Hao this time decided to fry the man's brains, choosing to add some spices in order to improve the taste, the report said.

But his killing days are over. Hao was sentenced to death on December 23, and execution was carried out immediately.

Whales' forefathers may have walked on land

WASHINGTON: A recent fossil find of ancient whale ancestors shows that the giant mammals' forefathers may have walked on land, according to report published this week in the Journal Science, reports AFP.

"This critter is a missing link between land animals and modern whales," said J G M Thewissen, a researcher with northeastern Ohio University.

The fossil, estimated to be some 50 million years old, was found at the site of an ancient sea in Pakistan. Thewissen said the creature was about the size of a large male lion, weighing between 270-315 kilograms (400-700 pounds).

"It is a very complete specimen and has enough of the anatomy to teach us something about how the animal moved on land," said Thewissen.

The Ambulocetus Natans, as the researcher calls them, had large feet and fully developed legs in the rear and stubby front feet joined almost to the shoulders.

Indian troops killed 1075 Kashmiris last year

NEW DELHI, Jan 14: Indian Security Forces killed 1,075 Muslim rebels and arrested 2,426 militants last year in the northern state of Kashmir, which has been ravaged by a bloody separatist drive, the Press Trust of India said Thursday, reports AFP.

Indian troops, comprising army soldiers, paramilitary forces and border guards, shot dead 1,075 guerrillas in 1993 — double the previous year's figure of 554, Lieutenant General Surinder Singh said.

Secessionist-linked violence in Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, claimed more than 2,600 lives in 1993, he added.

The disputed state is claimed by both India and Pakistan, which have fought two of their three wars over it since their 1947 independence from British Rule.

Singh said the army had foiled 34 attempted border crossings by Pakistani troops and militants trained by Islamabad, leading to the deaths of 161 rebels and 28 Pakistani commandos.

"(Kashmir) is totally under the army's control," the head of India's Northern Command said in Udhampur town.

The fighters follow recent official updates released on January 5, which said more than 8,100 people had fled in the Himalayan state since 1990.

when a Muslim-separatist campaign became violent.

Rights groups and social activists charge Indian troops with violating human rights in Kashmir and killing suspected militants while in custody. A common slogan of Kashmiri Muslims is "stop custodial deaths".

Zhirinovsky cold-shouldered by US leaders

MOSCOW, Jan 14: Russian ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky was cold-shouldered by US leaders late Thursday and deemed unworthy to take part in an official reception in honour of US President Bill Clinton, reports AFP.

"We didn't invite Zhirinovsky because his actions and his language and his statements do not make him fit to be in a meeting (with) or invited by the president of the United States," said Secretary of State Warren Christopher.

Another of the leaders of Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Aleksey Mitrofanov, snubbed an invitation to the reception in the home of the US ambassador in Moscow.

But among those present was the leader of the Communist Party Gennady Zyuganov.

1,778 UN observers to monitor South African polls

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 14: The UN Security Council took the first step Thursday toward authorizing the dispatch of 1,778 observers to South Africa's first non-racial elections in April, reports AFP.

The Security Council agreed on a draft resolution that is expected to go to a vote Friday.

"These elections are the most important political event of 1994. We can be sure that a failure will be put at the door of the UN," US diplomat Edward Walker told the council.

The United Nations is to coordinate 2,840 observers in the April 27 elections, including those from other countries

and groups such as the Organisation of African Unity.

The total number of observers, including those from private agencies, could swell to more than 5,000, the United Nations said.

Meanwhile, in Johannesburg, a shadow white extremist group threatened Thursday to kill foreign observers unless they leave South Africa.

There are currently 50 UN observers stationed in the country in addition to smaller missions from the Commonwealth, the European Community and the Organisation of African Unity.

Meanwhile, the South African government, the African National Congress (ANC)

and the conservative Freedom Alliance held secret talks late Thursday, chief government negotiator Roelf Meyer said today.

Meyer said in a radio interview: "It was exploratory discussions to see whether there could be any basis of commonality."

While no agreement had been reached, he said, "certain positions" would now be taken back to the various parties' principals for approval.

The government and ANC have been trying for months to reach a political settlement with the alliance, which has rejected the interim constitution that will come into effect after all-race elections on April 27.

Australia braces for threat of floods

SYDNEY, Jan 14: Southeastern Australia braced today for the threat of floods and mudslides after ferocious firestorms swept through more than 800,000 hectares (two million acres) in 16 days, reports AFP.

During the crisis about 10,000 firefighters battled flames that killed four people and destroyed or damaged more than 300 homes, according to the bush fire services.

Firefighters contained more than 100 bushfires in the state of New South Wales and declared the worst of the disaster was over.

"The critical threat to communities around the state is over but the mopping up is still to be done," bush fire services commissioner Phil Kperber said.

"The immediate threat is over but the fires are not yet out. It has been hell."

The fires, however, also left eastern Australia's light sandy soil without vegetation to protect against heavy rain over the next few weeks, New South Wales commissioner for soil conservation Warwick Watkins told AFP.

"If we get a lot of rain, the topsoil and ash will move. It will end up in the streams and potentially block drains, he said.

"Ironically, after a major fire

like this one, if there is heavy rain you get the risk of significant soil erosion, flooding and mud and ash slides."

Studies suggested 50 tonnes of soil could be lost in each hectare (20 tonnes in each acre) of land after bushfires, he added. Moderate rain would extinguish the fires without risking major erosion but a storm could create floods or slides.

Watkins, also Director General of the Department for conservation and land management, said staff would assess the risks with observation flights.

Satellite data and ground inspections, especially in populated areas.

"The potential for significant damage both socially and environmentally is fairly great," he said.

"If it had happened in isolated, inaccessible areas we could have let mother nature do much of the work herself."

Firefighters meanwhile guarded large blazes around Gosper mountain, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) north of Sydney, in the hunter valley which lies about 50 kilometres (30 miles) further north and in the blue mountains, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) west of Sydney, a bush fire services spokesman said.



A Russian vendor holds up a US-Russian summit T-shirt showing US President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin wearing sunglasses, in Moscow Jan 13. Clinton arrived Thursday in Moscow for a three-day official visit. Text underneath reads "Working for a brighter future". — AFP photo

Ntaryamira new Burundian President

BUJUMBURA, Jan 14: Burundi's parliament chose a new civilian president on Thursday to replace Melchior Ndayaye, slain by members of the armed forces in an October coup which collapsed after triggering a frenzy of ethnic blood-letting, reports Reuters.

Agriculture and Livestock Minister Cyprien Ntaryamira, 38, was elected head of state for a five-year term after Burundi's ruling and opposition parties agreed on his candidacy.

Ntaryamira is from the Hutu majority like Ndayaye.

India to have world's largest number of AIDS carriers by yr end

BOMBAY, Jan 14: India will have the world's largest number of AIDS carriers by the end of the year, with some four million people likely to be infected with the virus, according to a prominent authority on the disease, reports AFP.

There were an estimated two million HIV-positive cases in India at the end of 1993 and international trends show the number doubles every year, said Dr Ishwarprasad Gilada, head of the private Indian Health Organisation (IHO).

Gilada's estimates contrast dramatically with the official figures of the Indian govern-

ment which acknowledges just 14,000 HIV-positive cases and 529 sufferers of full-blown AIDS.

Gilada, India's leading anti-AIDS campaigner, claimed the official figures were deceptive and did not provide even a hint of the disaster facing the country.

Explaining the discrepancy, he said: "This is because as yet there is no compulsory testing or reporting."

These (official) figures show only the results of voluntary testing, something very few people will go in for due to the stigma attached to an HIV

positive patient," he said.

Gilada said the IHO came up with its own estimates through projections based on random testing in urban areas.

"Lack of zeal and commitment by the government, poor social awareness and inadequate infrastructure are the main causes of the rapid spread of the deadly virus," Gilada added.

"Our doctors also need to be trained to locate AIDS," he said. "Very often, even in major cities, they continue to treat opportunistic infections ravaging an AIDS patient without a clue to the person's

actual problem."

India's first reported AIDS case was in 1986, when a Bombay businessman died after contracting the virus through contaminated blood received during heart surgery in the United States.

Gilada said the official response to the looming AIDS disaster was shortsighted and mixed in red tape.

"New Delhi's AIDS control programme has a budget of only 2.2 billion rupees (75 million dollars) for five years meaning an allocation of only 450 million rupees (15 million dollars) every year.

"This is pathetically inadequate," he said.

"India does not yet have a national law requiring compulsory testing of blood in blood banks. Even the poorest of African nations demands compulsory blood testing."

The IHO estimates that between 80 and 85 per cent of the HIV positive cases in India were sexually transmitted, 10 per cent resulted from contaminated blood, five per cent were intravenous drug abusers and in two per cent of the cases the virus was passed on from mother to child.

"AIDS has to come stay in

India. We will not be free of it for several decades now," he said.

The IHO, set up in 1982, has been working with AIDS patients and high-risk groups such as prostitutes since 1985, mainly in Bombay.

It has been campaigning for greater use of condoms and has also demanded that high school students be taught about safe sex and AIDS.

"There is tremendous opposition from school authorities and parents who feel that sex education would make students promiscuous," he said.

Anti-Mafia drive in Italy: 70 held

ROME, Jan 14: Police arrested at least 70 people today in a major anti-Mafia swoop across northern Italy, reports AFP.

Police said that 150 arrest warrants had been issued, including some against people already jailed on charges of maintaining links with Mafia groups or engaging in drug trafficking.

The swoop began early Friday in Lombardy but later spread to other regions, including Piemonte in the north and Calabria in the south of the country.