

Galazov elected North Ossetia president

MOSCOW, Jan 17: The troubled Republic of North Ossetia in southern Russia elected parliamentary chairman Akhmed Galazov as its first president in a weekend poll, Inter-Tass news agency said today, reports Reuters.

Tass reported from the regional capital Vladikavkaz that Galazov, a former local communist party chief with good connections in Moscow, had polled over 60 per cent of Sunday's vote. Turnout was around 55 per cent.

North Ossetia, which is in the volatile Caucasus region, hit the headlines in late 1992 when around 200 people were killed in fighting with neighbouring Ingushetia over territory.

The conflict has its roots in a decision by Soviet dictator Josef Stalin to exile Ingushes en masse to Central Asia during World War II. Ossetians took over much of their land.

President Boris Yeltsin flew down to the fractious region in early December in a bid to end the conflict.

Tension mounts in Maharashtra

Shiv Sena stages arson attacks

BOMBAY, Jan 17: Tension shot up today in the Indian state of Maharashtra as Hindu militants staged arson attacks in response to the renaming of a university after Bhim Rao Ambedkar, the hero of the untouchable community, reports AFP.

Maharashtra police braced for violence as they prepared to block a visit today by Hindu fundamentalist leader Bal Thackeray to the city of Aurangabad, the restive site of the renamed university in western Maharashtra.

Thackeray is the leader of the Shiv Sena, whose members have been at the forefront of the violent protests by upper-caste Hindus which erupted late Friday.

Police in Bombay, the Maharashtra capital, said they had erected checkpoints at all points of entry into Aurangabad to ensure Thackeray does not enter the city. They have banned the visit amid fears it would spark large-scale unrest.

"Nobody is above the law," senior police officer M N Singh said when asked whether Thackeray would be arrested.

The Hindu militant leader plans to lead a rally tomorrow in Aurangabad to protest the renaming of the Marathwada University after the late Ambedkar, the author of the Indian constitution.

Ambedkar is lionised by Harijans, the so-called untouchables at the lowest rung of the Hindu caste ladder.

If Thackeray is arrested, Sena activists would fan out into the villages to carry out "disruptive activities," sources in his party said.

Meanwhile, a journalist ate poison and died in the town of Yawat Mal on Sunday, leaving behind a suicide note that he was taking his life to protest the renaming of the university, the Marathi-language Maharashtra Times said.

The journalist, identified as Vinod Gudge, was the first to

commit suicide to protest the decision announced by the Maharashtra government Friday.

Another protestor set himself on fire in Beed district but survived with burns to 80 per cent of his body, Maharashtra Times said.

Half-a-dozen Harijans had committed suicide to force the renaming of the university, which has triggered arson attacks on Harijan settlements and government property in the sparsely-populated and underdeveloped western region of the state.

Shiv Sena militants torched a government veterinary hospital and schools in Jalna district and attacked trucks travelling on highways in the region, police said.

A Harijan slum and an irrigation department office were set on fire in the district of Parbhani.

Forty Harijan homes were set on fire Sunday in the vil-

lage of Sakshal Pimpri where the administration imposed a collective fine of 200,000 rupees on residents to raise funds for compensation, the police said.

No casualties were reported in the attacks. No trains or buses have plying in the region since Saturday following attacks which forced transport services to be cancelled.

Nishikant Bhalerao, editor of Marathwada newspaper, told AFP by telephone from Aurangabad that Harijans in rural areas were gripped by terror.

"They will flee and come to the cities in search of safety," he said.

Bhalerao said Harijans were paying reverential homage at the gates of the university which sports a board with its new name.

The outbreak of inter-caste violence is India's worst since 1990, when then premier V P Singh hiked job quotas for the lower castes.

Khmers reject demobilisation of forces

PHNOM PENH, Jan 17: Cambodia's Maoist Khmer Rouge has rejected the demobilisation of its guerrilla forces, branding a government peace offer as nothing more than a trap to destroy the organisation, reports Reuters.

The move opens the way for both sides to use the current dry season to settle their differences on the battlefield.

In a statement dated January 15 but released today, the peace plan — the demobilisation of the Khmer Rouge military machines and its eventual integration into the country's army.

"Such activity cannot achieve real national reconciliation because it is not a real unification of national forces but an attempt to catch and put the DK Party (Democratic Kampuchea or Khmer Rouge) in an Iran cage which the 'young' communists have arranged since its aggression in Cambodia. By doing this the DK Party will commit suicide," said Khieu Samphan.

Top Filipino CP leader surrenders

DUMALNEG, Philippines, Jan 17: The highest ranking communist guerrilla leader in the northern Philippines surrendered here today, local authorities said. In the latest blow to the insurgent group which the military says is an irreversible decline, reports AFP.

Marciano Julian, better known as "Commander Jomar", who headed the north Luzon Command of the New People's Army (NPA), turned himself in along with six top aides including his wife to provincial government and police officials in this remote northern town.

Dumalneg mayor Francis Espiritu told reporters who witnessed the surrender that another high-ranking communist guerrilla leader in the northern Philippines, Lorenzo Padama, who is believed to lead the NPA units in the Cagayan Valley region, had sent surrender feelers.

Provincial police senior superintendent Renato Rosete said Julian is allied with the faction of the exiled Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) founder Jose Maria Sison.

Sabah state CM convicted of corruption

KOTA KINABALU, Malaysia, Jan 17: The Chief Minister of Malaysia's opposition-led Sabah state was convicted today of corruption, reports Reuters.

Joseph Pairing Kitingan was convicted of warding a government contract worth 1.48 million ringgit (\$41,700 dollar) to a company owned by his relatives.

High Court Judge Denis Ong, in passing judgement, said: "I am satisfied that Pairin's approval of the project was an abuse of his position."

Ong delayed sentencing, which will determine if Pairing can run in the state elections fixed for February 18 and 19, until later in the day.

If Pairing is fined not less than 2,000 ringgit (732 dollar) or jailed for a term not less than one year, he will have to quit his position and would be unable to take part in the polls.

Today's verdict and sentencing of Pairin, who heads of mainly Christian and tribal-based Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) opposed to the national front coalition of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, is being keenly watched by the stock market.

Analysts said if Pairing bows out, the oil and timber-rich state on Borneo dubbed Malaysia's "wild east" for its often turbulent politics, will be thrown into confusion.

PBS supporters have alleged that the corruption charge against Pairin, a native Kadazan, was politically motivated to disrupt the state government.

Demonstration against education policy in France

PARIS, Jan 17: France's left-wing opposition has been rejuvenated by a giant demonstration in Paris against the education policy of conservative Prime Minister Edouard Balladur's government, political commentators said, reports Reuters.

Supporters of the state school system marched on Sunday in a festive procession stretching nine km (six miles) to celebrate the collapse of government plans to increase public spending on private church schools.

Organisers said one million people took part in the biggest demonstration in the French capital in 10 years, police put the turnout at 260,000.

"The Left is back," said TF-1 television commentator Gerard Carreyrou, saying the protest had increased the chances of Socialist Party leader Michel Rocard in next year's presidential election.

He said Balladur, shown by opinion polls as favourite to

win the election, could not afford to make another such mistake.

The march, organised by teachers' unions and the socialist and communist parties, was originally intended to protest against a law dragged through parliament last month to lift the ceiling on local authority spending on private school.

After France's constitutional council annulled the law last week as unfair to state schools, the organisers turned the march into a celebration and a warning to the centre-right government.

The government had argued that private schools badly needed repairs to ensure the safety of children. Teachers' unions said state schools had more need of funds to build facilities, carry out repairs, hire teachers, buy equipment and improve security.

Leftist leaders, denying that they were trying to make political capital out of the dispute,

said the demonstration was merely aimed at defending the state school system.

Jean-Pierre Chevenement, a former socialist Defence Minister, was the only prominent leftist to call it a challenge to Balladur's economic and social policies.

But television commentators and members of ruling coalition said the dispute offered the Left its first opportunity to rally and regroup since the socialists went down to a devastating election defeat last March.

"There are two things there, said centrist Raymond Barre, a former prime minister, on television, first, the resuscitation of the Left, and then, also, the French people's love for state schools."

But France-2 television commentator Arlette Chabot said would be more difficult for the Left to regain voters' support than rally supporters against a particular government plan.



Members of Ezzedin Al Qassam (Hamas military wing) with the son of Yusuf Mohammad Esleem (seen on picture) from the Islamic fundamentalist movement Hamas, who was killed on January 14, after he stabbed to death one Israeli man and wounded another in Erez crossing, North of the Gaza Strip.

Zemin asks partymen to follow Deng

BEIJING, Jan 17: Chinese Communist Party General-Secretary Jiang Zemin has called on party members to unite under Deng Xiaoping's thought to avoid the regime's disintegration, reports AFP.

Jiang, who is also head of state and armed forces chief, called on communists to put the interest of all above that of the individual and urged regions to bow to national interest to prevent China becoming a sheet of loose sand, a reference to China before the communists took over in 1949.

"We must use the thought of Deng Xiaoping to guide the party, armed forces, the people and the nation, said Jiang in a speech last November but only published Monday.

"Our party needs an ideologically correct line," he said in the speech, which was delivered at the end of the third plenum of the party's 14th Congress.

The Congress, from November 11-14, saw the adoption of a 50-point ruling on the second phase of economic reforms launched by Deng in the early 1980s.

The speech contained nothing factually new, and its publication Monday came after two other recent major speeches by Jiang, considered the front-runner to succeed Deng, now 80.

The frequency of his speeches, which all stress the need to pursue economic reforms and strengthen the political system while calling the communists to order, underline the concern of China's leaders about what will happen without Deng, political analysts said.

Somalis were killed. That provoked the US decision to withdraw and announcements by other countries that they would do the same.

But while the West was saying it had had enough, the Pakistanis, Indians and a few other offered to do more.

Habibullah Boutros-Ghali, the UN Secretary-General, has recommended that the international force be reduced from its current 33,000 to about 16,000, with most of the soldiers stationed outside volatile Mogadishu.

That means the Pakistanis would be covering more turf in the capital with less UN support, and none of the US attack helicopters and communications technology that are so critical. The notion worries many Pakistanis.

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"A lot of Somalis have told us it wasn't planned massacre, but rather a panicked reaction," said Maj Masood Akram of the 15th Frontier Force, which is stationed in the shell-pocked Mogadishu soccer stadium. It has not stopped us from going out and doing our humanitarian work. We hope it won't happen again.

That one day shaped the UN mission more than any other. Eight days later, edgy Pakistani troops opened fire on civilians demonstrating in front of their post, killing at least 14.

Clashes between UN and militia forces escalated over the next few months, until a fierce battle October 3 in which 18 American soldiers and many

view as brother Muslims," said Col Tariq Sahim Malik, the longest-serving Pakistani battalion commander in Somalia.

"We have given our blood and our sweat. We have done 6th Punjab Regiment arrived two years ago and is going home this month.

There is no question that the Pakistanis have made great sacrifices.

They were the first to send soldiers — 500 even before the huge UN force arrived 13 months ago — and they've lost 34 of their 5,000 men since the United Nations took charge of the operation in May, more than any other national contingent.

Twenty-four Pakistanis were killed June 5 in ambushes that started months of fighting between the peacekeepers and

Italians go to polls Mar 27

ROME, Jan 17: Italy embarked on an uncertain road to general elections under a complicated new voting system on March 27 after President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro finally dissolved the country's scandal-tainted parliament, reports Reuters.

About a third of the members of the outgoing legislature are being investigated for corruption in ever-widening inquiries which have destroyed the credibility of the parties which had dominated political life since World War II.

Scalfaro said in a letter to

the speakers of the two chambers that parliament was no longer representative of the people. "The world now passes to the voters," he said.

State radio said the curtain had fallen "on the shortest and most tormented legislature in the history of the republic."

The path for early elections was clear when Prime Minister Carlo Azeglio Ciampi submitted his resignation last Thursday after a parliamentary debate exposed deep divisions over the timing of the long-awaited polls.

Neither the Pakistanis nor the Somalis relish the prospect. Somalis often call the Pakistanis "Shigal," after an especially weak local clan. The Americans accuse the Pakistanis of withholding fire for fear of provoking the Somalis.

The Pakistanis say they are doing their job with care and that the Americans may be taking too many risks when they open fire. Pakistani officers also point out that they are the ones who are staying.

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Cambodian PMs, cabinet members leave for China

PHNOM PENH, Jan 17: Cambodia's two prime ministers and most of their cabinet members left today for a four-day visit to China, reports Reuters.

First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh and second Prime Minister Hun Sen were accompanied by joint Defence Ministers General Teik Bank and Tea Chamrath and the Foreign, Information, Industry, Commerce, Planning, Agriculture, Public Works and Transport ministers.

The trip follows an invitation from Chinese Premier Li Peng.

Speculation is rife that the government will be seeking to bolster its military arsenal before a possible dry-season offensive against Khmer Rouge

Departure of Western forces from Somalia worries Pakistanis

MOGADISHU, Somalia, Jan 17: After the Americans, French, Italians, Germans and nearly everyone else bails out of Somalia in the coming months, most of the faces under the blue UN helmets will be Pakistanis, reports AFP.

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A model presents a short black lace kick-pleated dress with Arlesienne fichu effect for the 1994 Spring/Summer High Fashion collection by Christian Lacroix on January 16 in Paris.

Off the Record

Dogs executed for murder!

HONG KONG: Two dogs were executed here Monday after they were allegedly involved in a murder case in which an eight-year-old girl living in the territory was killed about a week ago, reports Xinhua.

The five-year-old male dog, the prime culprit of the murder, and its accomplice, a female dog, were put down in a human way this morning by officials from the Fishery and Agriculture Department.

The dogs were killed after they received overdose injections of barbitone and died without any pain, said a spokesman from the Fishery and Agriculture Department.

The spokesman said that the execution was conducted with the permission of the dogs' owner, but he declined to say whether the owner of the dogs will be sued or not.

The tragedy took place on January 8 when the dogs that were said to be usually quite tame suddenly mounted a fierce attack on the victim who was then playing nearby with other kids. The male dog bit the throat of the girl till she died.

'Keating a busybody'

MANILA: A Malaysian government minister today called Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating a busybody who had no right to criticise Kuala Lumpur's decision not to attend last November's APEC summit in Seattle, reports Reuters.

A row erupted between the two nations after Keating called Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad recalcitrant for snubbing the summit of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum leaders.

This (Keating) is a busybody. He was a third party, a guest in Seattle. Who is he to say that? Trade and Industry Minister Rafidah Aziz told Filipino and Malaysian businessmen in Manila.

Kite thread slashes throat

NEW DELHI: The sharp thread of a flying kite slashed the throat of a motorcyclist and killed him, news reports said Monday, according to AP.

R C Sanal, an engineer with the Irrigation Department in Orissa in eastern India was driving to a meeting in Bhubaneswar, the state capital, when the freak accident occurred, United News of India said.

A pillion rider, who was not identified, also was injured, the agency said. It did not say when the accident occurred.

In India, war games with kites is a popular sport. Enthusiasts often put a paste of boiled rice mixed with glass dust on the string to increase the sharpness and cut the thread of other kites.

'Di's mob peril'

LONDON: Princess Diana sparked a security alert when she was mobbed by well-wishers after going to a ballet performance without her royal bodyguards, a British newspaper reported Monday, says Reuters.

The tabloid Sun said Diana was mobbed by "hordes of adoring fans" who touched her and insisted she stop and shake hands as she left London's royal opera house last Friday. The Princess was then forced to push through a large crowd to get to her waiting car.

"Di's mob peril: Street crowds swarm go-it-alone Princess" was the headline on the Sun's front-page report.

The 32-year-old Princess, who is officially separated from her husband, heir-to-the throne Prince Charles, announced late last year that she was temporarily withdrawing from her public private life away from the media spotlight.

The Sun quoted a former senior policeman as saying: "She is setting herself up to be attacked by terrorists, kidnappers and cranks."



Turkey-Israeli accord soon

STRANBUL, Jan 17: Turkey and Israel will sign a cooperation accord against terrorism and drug smuggling in the foreseeable future, the local press reported today, says Xinhua.

Israeli ambassador David Granit was quoted as saying that speculations that Israel had been 'cool' toward such an accord had been due to a misunderstanding.

Before Foreign Minister Hikmet Cetin's visit to Israel last November, Ankara sounded out the Israelis on signing an accord which stipulates cooperation against crimes, terrorism and drug trafficking.

Ankara made it known that they would like to sign the accord during the visit of Cetin and submitted a 'draft text'.