

Rebels plan to strike again in southern Mexico

SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, Mexico, Jan 20: Rebels are planning to strike again in southern Mexico, the government charged Wednesday, as US Rep. Joe Kennedy arrived to look into allegations of abuses against Indians in the region, reports AP.

The government warning came a day after the government's top envoy to the guerrillas offered to talk with the insurgents on their terms for disarming.

There has been no answer to what other conciliatory offers by the government as it seeks to quell the uprising by rebels fighting for Indian rights in impoverished Chiapas state. The government on Wednesday ordered a new Indian affairs commission created to study improving conditions in the area.

The Defense Department statement said that rebels planned to attack the towns of Yajalón, Sabinal and Venustiano Carranza in southern Chiapas. None were taken by rebels during the fighting that broke out January 1.

BRIEFLY

Arafat in Cairo: PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat arrived in Cairo on Thursday for talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Palestinian autonomy talks with Israel and the US-Syrian summit, Reuter reports from Cairo.

Arafat will also meet visiting US Commerce Secretary Ron Brown to discuss US aid for the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho, which are to come under Palestinian self-rule under the PLO-Israel peace deal signed in September.

The Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel are still divided over security arrangements for the autonomous regions, officials at talks in the Red Sea resort of Taba said on Wednesday.

125 tusks seized in Taiwan: Authorities said Thursday they seized 125 elephant tusks and other ivory products as they were being smuggled in Taiwan from Nigeria, AP reports from Taipei.

The haul worth more than 100 million Taiwan dollars (3.7 million US dollar) was the largest ever in Taiwan, customs officials said.

The tusks and 2,300 seals made of ivory were found Wednesday at the bottom of a container arriving at Keelung port near Taipei, they added.

13 die in Indonesian floods: A rescue team has found the bodies of nine people missing in floods on Indonesia's Java island, bringing the death toll to 13, the officials Antara news agency said yesterday, Reuter reports from Jakarta.

Fourteen people were reported missing on Monday after a passenger boat carrying 67 people capsized in a swollen river in the central Java town of Solo, 460 km (290 miles) east of Jakarta, after days of heavy rains.

The bodies of the five others missing from the boat have not yet been recovered.

6 bombs explode in Turkey: Six bombs exploded in Istanbul Wednesday, causing material damage but no casualties, in what police said was the work of an Islamic extremist organisation, the Anatolian news agency reported. AFP reports from Ankara.

Two other bombs were defused by police.

A member of the Islamic extremist group the great eastern Islamic pioneer front was arrested in connection with the blasts, according to police officials cited by the agency.

The bombs were designed to make a lot of noise and to cause panic among the population, the agency said.

Strike paralyses Zaire: Markets, shops and businesses were shut down Wednesday, and people stayed off the streets in a strike called by the opposition to protest military rule, AP reports from Zaire.

Troops cordoned off Limite, the neighbourhood where opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi lives. Tshisekedi called for street demonstrations, but there was no sign of protests.

Public protests are rare in Zaire because soldiers usually fire at demonstrators.

ROK FM to visit NAFTA states:

South Korea's Foreign Minister is to visit the three member nations of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to try to ensure the pact does not discriminate against non-members, the ministry said, Reuter reports from Seoul.

Hand Sung-Joo is to visit Canada on February 14 for two days, then spend three days in the United States before going to Mexico from February 20 to 22, a ministry statement issued yesterday said.

In the United States, he is expected to meet Secretary of State Warren Christopher to discuss ways of dealing with North Korea's suspected development of nuclear weapons, the Foreign Ministry statement said.

S Africa asked to join C'wealth:

Chief Emeka Anyaoku, secretary general of the Commonwealth secretariat, on Wednesday night invited South Africa to rejoin the Commonwealth, AP reports from London.

South Africa quit the 50-nation organisation of Britain and its former colonies in 1961 over the country's then apartheid policy of separate racial development.

Commonwealth leaders at a summit in Cyprus in December announced they were prepared to accept South Africa back in, saying change there is now irreversible. The Commonwealth lifted most of its sanctions against South Africa in September last year.

Vietnam CP politburo expanded

HANOI, Jan 20: The central committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam has elected four people to the Politburo including Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam, expanding the ruling body to 17 members, reports AFP.

The committee meeting ahead of the mid-term national conference to begin today, elected Cam as well as head of the army's political department Le Kha Phieu, head of the party's control commission Do Quang Thang, and one of the party's secretaries Nguyen Ha Pham to the Politburo, the Vietnam news agency reported.

Hosokawa to resign if he fails to pass reforms bill today

TOKYO, Jan 20: A landmark package of electoral and political funding reforms five years in the making cleared a parliamentary committee Thursday, setting the stage for a final vote Friday that is expected to be very close, reports AP.

Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa has hinted he will resign or call new elections if he fails to pass the package, which would ban corporate contributions to individual politicians and change the system for electing the lower house of Parliament.

The reform bills are aimed at putting a stop to repeated bribery and money scandals that have brought down several governments and often brought policy debate to a standstill.

If the bills pass, it would represent the first major legislative success for Hosokawa, who has brought a fresh image to government in the five months since he took over from the corruption-plagued

Liberal Democrats but little concrete action.

But the outcome of the showdown vote in Parliament's upper house is far from certain. The bills passed the lower house November 18 and cleared the next-to-last hurdle with approval Thursday by an upper house committee.

Hosokawa's coalition has 131 seats in the 252-seat upper house, five more than a majority. But several legislators from the Socialists, the largest party in the coalition, have said they will vote against the bills and around a dozen haven't announced their decision.

That means the coalition needs support from the Liberal Democrats. It picked up one vote Thursday from LDP legislator Tomiochi Hoshino, who voted for the bills in the committee and said he planned to quit the party.

"The main event is still to come," said legislator Sadao Hirano of the coalition's Japan Renewal Party.

The reforms would overturn a 69-year-old system under which each district elects several legislators to the lower house. That leads to corruption, reform proponents say.

The new system would establish 274 single-seat districts, while another 226 legislators would be selected through proportional representation based on separate voting for political parties, rather than candidates.

Some Liberal Democrats and Socialists oppose the single-seat district idea, saying it could allow a party that only wins a minority of votes to take over the government.

Other critics say loopholes would allow companies to continue giving money to politicians by disguising their donations as gifts to a political party.

The reforms have been under discussion since the mid-1988 emergence of a scandal involving cut-price stock offered to politicians by the Recruit conglomerate.

Liberia dumps toxic waste in Malaysian waters

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 20: Malaysia has demanded a 200,000 US dollar bond and other "safeguards" from agents of a Liberian-registered super-tanker on which thousands of sacks of toxic waste were found, officials said Wednesday, reports AFP.

The Malacca strait, which separates Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, is one of the world's busiest waterways and a favourite spot for tanker-cleaning operations, officials said.

"We saw thousands of sacks containing the waste stacked on the deck of this huge tanker," Rosnan Fathali, the acting Johore harbour master told AFP after inspecting the vessel.

The 338.32-metre (16,109-foot) long tanker has been cordoned off by Malaysian maritime and environment department vessels, officials

Officials said the tanker re-

cently dumped hundreds of sacks of the waste about five miles (eight kilometres) off Johore in the Malacca strait and had endangered breeding grounds of marine life along mangrove swamps.

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"This would show whether the waste is being legally accepted by someone or just to be disposed off indiscriminately," he said.

Seven Singaporeans who were among about 200 workers suspected to be involved in the cleaning operations of the tanker had been detained, Rosnan said.

Even if the ship sinks into neighbouring Singapore waters, the detention order would be brought into effect, Abu Bakar Jaafar, the director-general of the Malaysian Environment Department said.



Iraqi President Saddam Hussein addresses on Wednesday members of a European solidarity group in Baghdad supporting an end to sanctions against his regime, on democracy and human rights.

—AFP photo

Violence against Pak women rises

ISLAMABAD, Jan 20: Many human rights abuses against women grew worse in 1993 and Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has done little to solve the problem, a private group said Wednesday, reports AP.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an independent body, said none of the country's five governments last year made a serious effort to end human rights violations.

The most serious problems included violence against women, the deaths of people in prison, and a flawed legal system that's widely abused, the commission said.

The report said violence against women increased in 1993 while the literacy rate was at 52 per cent, down from 55 per cent in 1992. The literacy rate for Pakistani women, already one of the lowest in the world at around 20 per cent, continued

to decline.

Ms. Bhutto came to power for a second time following election in October and has pledged to improve conditions for women. She has opened an all-female police station to deal with crimes against women, but other measures have yet to materialise.

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praise for restoring many human rights and freeing political prisoners when she was first elected in 1988. But she has been reluctant to confront religious leaders, many of whom oppose increased freedoms for women.

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