

Pakistan protests Sharma's remark

ISLAMABAD, Feb 5: Pakistan has strongly protested what it called a personal attack against its Prime Minister by the Indian President, officials said Saturday, reports AFP.

Indian High Commissioner S K Lambah was summoned to the Foreign Office here late Friday to receive a note of complaint to be conveyed to his government, they said.

Indian President Shankar Dayal Sharma on Thursday accused Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of "losing touch with reality" and ignoring the plight of her own people.

"Mrs Bhutto has lost her roots as well as touch with reality and the culture of the subcontinent," Sharma said during a speech in the northern Indian city of Jaipur.

The Pakistani Foreign Office said in a statement that the

personal attack is not only unwarranted, but it is also a violation of the norms related to civilised conduct between sovereign states."

Sharma's remarks were meant to "deflect attention from India's massive violations of human rights in Indian-held Kashmir," the statement said.

The campaign would "not serve to deflect world opinion" from Kashmir, the statement said, adding that "Indian atrocities have shocked the civilised world and deserve to be condemned by the international community."

Bhutto told the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) in Geneva on Tuesday that Indian troops had killed more than 40,000 people since 1989 in a bid to stamp out a Kashmiri uprising against Indian rule.

WAGHA BORDER (India), Feb 5: About 15,000 people marched up to the border with Pakistan Saturday for a two-day demonstration to protest against Islamabad's support for Muslim separatists in Kashmir, reports AP.

The protest coincided with a day-long nation-wide general strike in Pakistan called by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to show solidarity with the separatists who have been fighting Indian security forces in Kashmir since the past three years. About 8,000 people have been killed.

The issue is at the core of India-Pakistan enmity, the South Asian neighbours who have fought three wars, including two over the Himalayan region of Kashmir, during the last four decades.

"Death to Benazir" and "Kashmir for Indians" shouted as they marched on a highway that cuts through wheat fields toward the heavily-guarded border in the northern state of Punjab.

About 3,000 policemen formed a wall with bamboo shields and stopped the howling men and women about 50 meters (yards) from the frontier marked by barbed wire. Hundreds of tourists and visitors from the two countries use the road every day, passing through metal gates on both sides of the border.

On Saturday, the gate was shut and no-cross-border traffic was allowed during the protest organised by the youth wing of Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao's Congress Party.

"It seems Pakistan has not forgotten the 1971 lesson," said Maninderjit Singh Bitta, president of the Indian Youth Congress, referring to the 1971 India-Pakistan war over Bangladesh, then known as East Pakistan. Pakistan lost the war.

The earlier conflicts in 1948 and 1965 over Kashmir left roughly one-third of the state with Pakistan and the rest with India.

Kashmir is the only Muslim-dominated region in the predominantly Hindu India. Once a princely state ruled by a Hindu King, it merged with India when the sub-continent won independence from Britain in 1947 and was divided on religious lines into India and Muslim Pakistan.

BRIEFLY

64 West African migrants dead: A total of 64 West African migrants were found dead in a police cell in the Gabon capital Libreville, a Defence Ministry spokesman said on Friday. Reuter reports from Libreville.

A government statement earlier reported deaths from what it described as fighting among inmates at the detention camp but gave no figures of casualties.

There was widespread scepticism in Libreville about the accuracy of the official version. Over-crowded cells often lead to suffocation in African prisons.

Deng to celebrate Lunar Year: Chinese senior leader Deng Xiaoping is expected to arrive in southern China's Zhuhai special economic zone next week where he will celebrate the Lunar New Year, a report said yesterday, according to AFP from Hong Kong.

Deng, 89, will arrive in Zhuhai at the border with the Portuguese enclave of Macau, which reverts to Chinese sovereignty in 1999, before the Lunar New Year Thursday, the Taiwan-funded United Daily news quoted sources as saying.

Chinese Premier Li Peng ended his five-day visit to Zhuhai on Friday and is currently in Shenzhen to attend the official opening of Daya Bay nuclear power plant on Sunday.

Referendum in Moldova Mar 6: Moldovan President Mircea Snegur on Friday ordered to hold a referendum on the country's independence next month, apparently seeking to quell nationalists who want to reunite with neighbouring Romania, AP reports from Moscow.

In accordance with Snegur's decree, the referendum will be held on March 6, the Interfax news agency reported.

Moldova's citizens will be asked a single question — whether they support an independent, unified and neutral Moldova "within the borders recognised by the United Nations."

US welcomes Ukraine: The White House on Friday welcomed a vote by Ukraine's parliament that moves the former Soviet republic closer to eliminating its nuclear weapons, calling it "a major non-proliferation achievement," AP reports from Washington.

The Clinton administration issued a congratulatory statement, playing down the fact that Ukrainian lawmakers also rejected a move to make the nation completely free of nuclear weapons.

The parliament voted 260-3 on Thursday to remove conditions it had imposed for approving the START 1 treaty requiring Ukraine to surrender its nuclear warheads. Lawmakers also passed the related Lisbon protocol on handing over the weapons.

Search for Colombian drug gang: An elite police team like the one used to kill drug lord Pablo Escobar in Cali, poised to hunt the bosses of the world's largest cocaine trafficking gang, a law enforcement official said.

More than 150 agents are expected to begin Monday pursuing the Cali cartel bosses: brothers Gilberto and Miguel Rodriguez, Jose Santacruz and Francisco Herrera, said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Agents of the US Drug Enforcement Administration are training the Colombian police team, which will use radio-tracking equipment, phone bugs and a secret base in Cali, El Tiempo newspaper reported Friday, citing unidentified police sources.

11 Buddhist nuns jailed: Eleven Tibetan Buddhist nuns have been sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to seven years apparently for attempting a protest, Amnesty International reported Friday. AP says from Beijing.

The sentences came to light the same day China announced the early releases of three political prisoners in an apparent response to stepped-up pressure from Washington to relax repression of dissent.

The international human rights group Amnesty International said the nuns from Garu Nunnery, north of the capital city of Lhasa, were arrested on June 14. The report was not clear on the reason for the arrests, but said unofficial sources in Lhasa speculated the nuns were arrested before they managed to begin a protest.

12 shot dead in Sudan: Three masked men with machine guns sprayed bullets on worshippers in a mosque Friday, killing 10 men and two children, police said. AP reports from Khartoum.

Seventeen people were also reported injured in the attack in this northeast African country, which has been under Muslim fundamentalist military rule for almost five years.

The assailants escaped in a pickup truck from the mosque at Um-Bada in Omdurman, 15 miles (26 km) north of Khartoum, the official Sudan News Agency said. No group claimed responsibility.

Discovery's cosmonaut almost stranded

CAPE CANAVERAL, Feb 5: The shuttle Discovery's Russian cosmonaut, Sergei Krikalev, was almost stranded in space a second time, as far as ham radio operators were concerned, reports AP.

After months of trying, the State Department finally got permission Friday from Russia's Ministry of Post and Telecommunications for Krikalev to use Discovery's ham radio to talk to people in his homeland. The federal Communications Commission quickly gave the final approval.

The Russian approval came not a moment too soon — Discovery's crew was already pulling out the shuttle's amateur radio for the first of five school contacts.

Afghan warfare destined to drag on inconclusively

KABUL, Feb 5: The fierce fighters of Afghanistan drove out the British colonialists in the 19th century, the Soviet army in the 1980s and all other would-be conquerors passing through central Asia, reports AP.

With the foreign forces now gone, the quarrelsome Afghans have turned their guns against each other, waging a brutal civil war that has devastated the capital and shows no sign of ending.

The latest battle erupted January 1, and five weeks of heavy fighting have settled nothing, proving only that an outright battlefield victory is beyond the grasp of all the Islamic factions.

This has become the painfully familiar pattern since April 1992, when the loosely allied Islamic factions ousted a Soviet-installed Communist government in place since 1979.

Some 100,000 Kabul residents have fled the city during the latest fighting, while around 10,000 have been wounded and an estimated 1,000 killed.

The warfare appears destined to drag on inconclusively, eventually ending in yet another stalemate.

Each new round of warfare compounds the country's problems. The outside world has become less and less interested in the Afghan conflict, and now has withdrawn almost completely.

Why don't these people

come to terms with each other and do something for the people instead of fighting each other, killing innocent people and destroying our homes?" asked Kabul resident Mohammed Sharif, whose son was killed by a rocket that also destroyed the family home.

The United Nations last month pulled out its small international staff and the few embassies operating in Kabul evacuated their diplomats.

Peace efforts have dissolved into a bitter exchange of insults between the rival Islamic groups and negotiations are unlikely to succeed any time soon.

The country was making modest steps toward rebuilding when war broke out New Years Day. The

marketplace in Kabul was bustling, full of food and other goods. Nine political parties formed a coalition government headed by Rabbani and Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

The government had little authority and barely functioned, but at least representatives of the rival parties were meeting on a regular basis without drawing guns.

It all fell apart when Hekmatyar and an unlikely ally, warlord Rashid Dostum, teamed up for an assault aimed at ousting President Rabbani. These three men — Rabbani, Hekmatyar and Dostum — now head the most powerful factions.

Dostum was a leading general in the Communist army. His defection to rebel forces in early 1992 was crucial to the

International

Protest against Pak support for Kashmiris

15000 Indians march to the border



But the simmering Muslim discontent with Indian rule exploded into a guerrilla war in late 1989, and India accuses Pakistan of training and arming the Kashmiri rebels. Pakistan denies the charge, but Benazir Bhutto says her country supports the Kashmiris' right to self-determination.

"We appeal to you as a fellow human being, belonging to this subcontinent, to stop this madness and work sincerely for peace," Bitta said in a speech delivered from atop a bus.

The protesters, who burned a cloth effigy of Benazir Bhutto after beating it with shoes, later dispersed peacefully to return to Amritsar, a Sikh holy city 30 kilometers (20 miles) to the east.

S Africa's army opened up to blacks

JOHANNESBURG, Feb 5: South Africa's army was opened up to blacks for the first time Friday with some Soweto recruits given a welcome kiss by Miss South Africa, Jacqui Mofakeng, reports AP.

Around 500 young men, mostly black, were recruited to the force at the Soweto ceremony. Police intervened to remove disappointed candidates from the recruiting station.

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Danish marine rescues 36 Tamils from sea

COPENHAGEN, Feb 5: Danish marine authorities said Friday they had rescued 36 Sri Lankan asylum seekers dumped at high sea from a Russian container ship in three small motorised rubber dinghies.

Some of the refugees said they had paid large sums of money to travel on the Russian vessel.

They were eventually recovered drifting in the bay of Koege, to the south east of the Danish capital, many of them with few clothes and plastic bags around their feet.

Officials took them for medical attention at Koege Hospital, and from there to a center for asylum seekers in Sandholm-Le Jren, North of Copenhagen.

Authorities and they had launched an investigation to identify the vessels which abandoned them, but that the serial numbers on three rubber dinghies had been erased.

According to the refugees the container ship left Sri Lanka January 5, and had

dropped them in smaller boats Thursday night. They said there had been several other dinghies.

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