

International

Expansion of Jewish settlements
PLO seeks emergency meeting of UNSC

GAZA, Dec 25: The PLO called on Saturday for an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council to discuss expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank which it said violated its 1993 peace deal with Israel, reports Reuter.

Marwan Karafani PLO leader Yasser Arafat's press advisor, said after the weekly cabinet meeting of the Palestinian authority which administers self rule in Gaza and Jericho.

The cabinet called on the US and Russia cosponsors of the peace process and on Europeans to pay attention to collusion between the Israeli army and settlers on expansion of settlements and land confiscation.

He told Reuters the cabinet further called on the cospon-

sors and the UN Security Council to hold an immediate meeting to discuss Israeli's settlement policy which constitutes a violation of the PLO-Israel accord.

Expansion of settlements in which more than 100,000 Israelis live among the more than one million Palestinians in the West Bank was a cornerstone of the former hardline Likud government and a main obstacle to Israeli Palestinian talks.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin defeated the Likud in 1992 elections promising a settlement halt a position that paved the way for the peace deal with the PLO.

But Rabin has allowed some West Bank settlement to continue, especially around East Jerusalem captured in the 1967 Middle East war.

BRIEFLY

California population hits 32m:

California's population surpassed 32 million in 1994, but population growth was slower than at any time since the early 1970s, state records show, AP reports from Sacramento.

As of July 1, the state was home to 32,140,000 people, according to official estimates released on Friday by the state's Department of Finance. That's an increase of 394,000 over the previous 12 months.

Storm batters New England: A storm that blustered up the length of the East Coast left more than 175,000 customers without power Saturday in New England and littered highways and railroad tracks with tree limbs on one of the year's busiest travel days, AP reports from Boston.

High wind knocked over the 50-foot (15-meter), 7300-pound (3,300-kg) Christmas tree outside the Prudential Center in Boston. Crews waited for the wind to die down before trying to put it back up.

Yemeni Speaker in Riyadh: Yemeni Parliament Speaker Abdallah Al-Ahmar arrived in Riyadh on Saturday for the highest level visit to Saudi Arabia by a Yemeni official since relations soured during the May-July civil war, AFP reports from Riyadh.

Playing down a recent border flare-up between Yemeni and Saudi forces, Sheikh Ahmar told reporters his visit was aimed at "strengthening and normalising the traditional ties" between Sanaa and Riyadh.

Rockets kill 4 in Kabul: Opponents of Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani killed four people and wounded 32 when they fired rockets into the capital Kabul on Friday and Saturday after a lull of several days, officials Kabul Radio said, Reuter reports from Islamabad.

The broadcast, monitored in Islamabad, said anti-Rabbani militia controlled by Hezb-e-Islami Party leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar fired 244 rockets into residential areas in the previous 24 hours. Three houses and a shop were destroyed.

Elections in Uzbekistan: Voters in the former Soviet Central Asian Republic of Uzbekistan went to the polls on Sunday to choose a new parliament in elections in which no opposition candidates have been allowed to run, AP reports from Tashkent.

Polling stations opened at 7.00 a.m (0800 BST) and were to remain in operation until 8.00 pm (2100 BST). Seven million people were eligible to cast ballots to fill the 250-seat people's assembly.

France cancels flights to Algeria: Air France cancelled all flights to Algeria scheduled for yesterday after four gunmen hijacked an Airbus A 300 of the French national carrier with 229 passengers and 12 crew still on board, an airline spokesman said on Saturday, AFP reports from Paris.

The decision also affects the Air France subsidiary air inter. The announcement came as witnesses in Algiers said that the hijackers had killed up to seven people.

Blast claims 3 in Pakistan: A bomb exploded in a bus in Pakistan's Punjab province on Saturday, killing three people and wounding several others, the state television said, Reuter reports from Islamabad.

It said the explosion at Kamoke, north of the provincial capital Lahore, rocked the bus. There was no immediate information about who set off the bomb.

Fire takes 7 lives in US: Fire fanned by stiff wind rapidly engulfed a house early Saturday and killed seven people, five of them children, in their sleep. Two of the victims were believed to be young autistic twins, AP reports from North Attleboro.

Flames were billowing out of every window of the two-story house by the time firefighters arrived.

China to publish book by Mao: The central committee of China's Communist Party has approved publication of "Selected Works of Mao Zedong on Foreign Affairs," the Xinhua news agency said Saturday, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

The book focuses on Mao's world view and China's diplomatic policies, said the report from Xinhua, monitored in Hong Kong. It includes 160 articles, speeches, talks and comments of Mao between 1937 and 1974.

Ancient village found in HK: Archaeologists have unearthed a 3,500-year-old village believed to be the oldest settlement in Hong Kong, on the island of Lantau near the site of the colony's new airport, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

New election law in Japan comes into effect

TOKYO, Dec 25: Japan's revised election law designed to clean up politics came into effect today, reports Reuter.

The law redraws the electoral map for the first time in seven decades, replacing multiple-seat constituencies with a combination of 300 first-past-the-post districts and 200 proportional representation seats.

Lawmakers and analysts said the new system meant more, policy-oriented elections rather than ones geared to purely local issues.

Other measures, including tighter controls on campaign funding to eliminate endemic corruption, will come into force on January 1.

Opposition pushes demand for fresh polls
Ministers, party leaders voice support for Rao

NEW DELHI, Dec 25: India's ruling party, facing its most serious crisis in years, rallied behind Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao today after his key rival quit the cabinet in a challenge to the premier's leadership, reports AFP.

Federal ministers and party leaders voiced support for Rao one day after Human Resource Development Minister Arjun Singh, resigned from the government, stunned the ruling Congress (I) party.

"I don't think this government will last till February," said Bommal. That's when five of India's 25 states go to the hustings in a crucial test of Rao's popularity. Rao, 73, became prime minister in June 1991.

Leaders of the ruling party

polls for parliament, whose five-year term expires in mid-1996.

"This is the beginning of the fall of the Congress," said Janata Dal (people's party) President S R Bommal after word of Arjun Singh's resignation and his tirade against Rao spread across the country.

Congress spokesman Chandrakar declined comment.

A few number of dissidents, however, threw their weight behind Arjun Singh, who is known to nurse prime ministerial ambitions and who led a nascent challenge to Rao in 1992.

Leaders of the ruling party

came to the defence of Rao, who is also the Congress president.

"Arjun Singh has conducted himself in a manner unworthy of a senior Congressman," said Welfare Minister Sitaram Kersari. Another Congress strongman, Bhajan Lal, charged Arjun Singh with "blackmailing" Rao.

Congress spokesman Chandrakar declined comment.

The disillusionment with the leadership today is so all pervasive," Arjun Singh said in the letter to Rao. "You only have to look around to see where the Congress stands to-day."

— AFP photo



An elderly Russian woman calls to stop the bloodshed in Chechnya as a military patrol stands behind, during the rally near Gorky Park in Moscow on December 24. Representatives of different political movements participated in the rally protesting the Russian attack on the Caucasian republic.

— AFP photo

Russia threatens all-out attack on Chechen capital

ARGUN (Russia), Dec 25: Russia warned Saturday it would soon launch an all-out attack on Grozny unless separatist forces surrendered, said a senior government official, as fierce battles raged for this strategic town east of the Chechen capital, reports AFP.

The Russian federal authorities will undertake armed action in the next few days to take Grozny under their control if the breakaway Russian republic's leaders do not surrender, television quoted Russian Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Yegorov as saying.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin had been expected to address the nation on the Chechnya crisis Saturday, but a presidential aide later hinted a statement was no unlikely before a meeting Monday of the

Security Council.

Meanwhile, international condemnation of the Russian military intervention in Chechnya mounted, as rifts within parliament and the army deepened over Yeltsin's handling of the conflict.

In Chechnya, heavy fighting continued around Argun, some 20 kilometres (12 miles) east of Grozny, as Russian helicopter gunships and heavy artillery pounded rebel Chechen positions.

They responded with rocket attack as the two sides battle for control of the main road from Grozny to the neighbouring Caucasus republic of Dagestan.

The fierce clashes sparked and exodus of panic-stricken civilians, causing huge traffic jams as hundreds of cars took

to the roads, fleeing to mountains south of Grozny, and west from Argun away from the current fighting.

Among those fleeing with their valuables an AFP correspondent spotted a peasant family and its herd of 15 cows.

In Moscow, spokesman Vyacheslav Kostikov said in a communiqué that the Security Council meeting would conduct a general analysis of the political and military aspects linked to restoring constitutional law in the republic of Chechnya.

Kostikov did not say whether Yeltsin has postponed his address to the nation, but Radio Moscow echos said Kostikov had indicated that Yeltsin would not make a statement until after Monday's meeting.



Israeli police take fingerprints from what is left of the body of a Palestinian suicide bomber that exploded himself at a busy Jerusalem bus stop early December 25. Eleven Israelis and one Palestinian were wounded in the blast. The Islamic fundamentalist Hamas has claimed responsibility for the attack.

— AFP photo

former chancellery and bunker complex into historical monuments would give them unmerited significance," said Rainer Klemke, spokesman for Berlin's Culture Ministry.

The ministry, which studied the issue for the senate had concluded the site should not be opened for fear of creating a neo-Nazi shrine.

The remnants are too modest to merit protection the area," Klemke said when he presented the senate's report to parliament.

The debate arose as city officials were assigning plots of land for new office buildings before the German government moves to Berlin from Bonn at the end of the decade.

Some of those who have seen what remains of Hitler's hideaway — from the surface

no more than a patch of wasteland — say the rooms contain so much kitsch that they should be made into a small museum to held debunk the Fuehrer's legacy.

"It will never become a pilgrimage for neo-Nazis," said archaeologist Alfred Kerndl, author of the classified report. "It's too laughable."

In one room, a mural shows Hitler's chief bodyguard barking orders to SS trainees in the form of thunderbolts, symbolising the Nazi belief that commands from superiors were forms of the Holy Spirit.

Another mural shows elite Waffen-SS soldiers sternly protecting motherly blonde women or guarding two men as they sit down for a beer.

Rotting furniture in one room bears strange engravings

copied from ancient Germanic ruins.

Movable items such as chairs and gas masks were confiscated by authorities after the war, but these could be replaced if the bunker is opened as a museum, said Kerndl.

The actual bunker where Hitler ran the last campaigns of World War Two and committed suicide on April 30, 1945 with his mistress Eva Braun, was destroyed during the Soviet army's assault on the Nazi capital.

The remaining rooms, three to six metres (10 to 20 feet) below central Berlin, have been sealed since then.

They might have stayed that way if the city had not decided to build offices for Germany's federal states on the site.

The Greens say the senate report is an effort to "sweep

away relics of Berlin's past with a bulldozer."

"We must leave the bunker there," said Albert Eppert, the Greens member pressing the issue. "We can build a glass ceiling over it so that people can walk over it."

It was no surprise that the senate decided as it did.

Culture Minister Ulrich Röder had said he agreed with the city's Jewish community that the rooms could become a neo-Nazi pilgrimage site no matter how they were presented.

Ministry spokesman Klemke said too little remains of the complex to justify saving it for posterity.

Only the two rooms for Hitler's chauffeurs remain, and there's nothing in them," he said.

American and Israeli Jewish

Queen prays for global peace in Xmas message

LONDON, Dec 25: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, in her traditional Christmas message, welcomed the arrival of peace in Northern Ireland, South



Queen Elizabeth

Africa and the Middle East this year and prayed for an end to fighting elsewhere — not least in Russia, reports AFP.

In the message broadcast today, the Queen said people

were often reminded of violence and hatred around the world.

However, comfort could be taken, she said, from the fact that more and more people around the world live now in "real hope of their children growing up in peace and free from fear."

Already this year peace is "gradually taking root" in Northern Ireland. South Africa has been welcomed back into the Commonwealth as a democratic nation, and in the Middle East "long standing enemies are healing."

Addressing herself to those formerly involved in conflict, she said: "Christ taught us to love our enemies and to do good to them that hate us."

"It is a hard lesson to learn," she said, "but this year has seen shining examples of that generosity of spirit which alone can banish division and prejudice."

Off the Record

Sartorial guidelines for legal eagles

SINGAPORE: What the well-dressed lawyer in this prim city-state should wear to court is now official, according to a report Sunday, reports AP.

Women lawyers must wear black skirt and black or plain coloured shoes, long sleeved white blouse and no flashy jewellery. Men will have to wear long-sleeved white shirts, a tie of "subdued" colour, a black jacket, black trousers and equally boring shoes.

In keeping with their steady efforts to maintain order in public life, authorities laid down the sartorial guidelines in a newly published book that also exhorts lawyers to be punctual at court hearings.

Lawyers risk a judgement against their clients, or they could be made to pay the costs of the hearing, the Sunday Times reported.

The dress code puts an end to women lawyers wearing traditional dresses of their religion or race — Malay Muslims wear a headgear and a loose shirt while ethnic Indians, mostly Hindus, wear sari.

'High time' for discussing masturbation openly?

LONDON: In an editorial supportive of doctor US surgeon General Jocelyn Elders, a leading British medical journal says it is "high time" that masturbation be discussed openly in sex education classes, reports AP.

US President Clinton dismissed Elders after she made comments supporting the discussion of masturbation during an AIDS meeting at the United Nations on Dec 1.

The Lancet, in an editorial published on Saturday, says Elders' dismissal is "a bizarre example of the triumph of politics and prejudice over common sense."

The journal refers to a 1988 sex survey that revealed 82 per cent of British men and 75 per cent of British women have masturbated at some time.

Since most people start to masturbate during adolescence, sex education lessons in school present an appropriate opportunity to raise the subject, The Lancet said.

Dad sues store for lack of diaper-changing facility

NEW YORK: There's a new rallying cry on gender discrimination: Equal rights for dads who change diapers!

A father is suing Lord & Taylor's department store after being forced to change his 15-month-old son on the edge of a wet wash basin in the department store's men's room, the Daily News reported on Saturday, says AP.

The women's bathroom there, like many American restaurants for women, has a diaper-changing table, but the men's room, like most restrooms for men, does not.

The offended father, Andrew Dwyer, who is on paternity leave from his job as a lawyer, filed suit on Friday in state Supreme Court, seeking compensatory damages of 1,500 dollars and punitive damages of 10,000 dollars, the newspaper said.