

BRIEFLY



US Secretary of State Warren Christopher (L) and Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev chat during their press conference on Wednesday after two days of talks. — AFP photo

Deng is in good health: China's government on Thursday continued to say senior leader Deng Xiaoping is healthy, despite new reports that his health has greatly declined. AP reports from Beijing.

De Klerk won't resign: Deputy President F W de Klerk described serious strains in South Africa's coalition government Thursday, but said he had no intention of quitting. AP reports from Johannesburg.

Filipino team to go to Japan: Fifty Filipino doctors and engineers experienced in earthquake rescues are ready to fly to Japan as soon as Tokyo gives the all clear. President Fidel Ramos said yesterday. Reuter reports from Manila.

China's population to exceed 1.2 b: China's population is expected to exceed 1.2 billion next month, five years earlier than the government hoped, the official China Daily reported on Thursday. AP says from Beijing.

Clint Eastwood to be honoured: Clint Eastwood will be honoured at the 67th Academy Awards with the Irving Thalberg Award for "consistently high quality of motion picture production." AP reports from Beverly Hills.

Thailand deports 427 Myanmarese: More than 400 illegal Myanmar workers were rounded up and deported back to Myanmar yesterday as part of an effort to prevent illegal workers entering Thailand. Immigration Department officials said. Reuter reports from Mae Sot.

Peru's first lady on hunger strike: Peru's estranged first lady Susana Higuchi has gone on a hunger strike to protest her husband's elimination from the April congressional elections. Reuter reports from Lima.

3 Filipino kidnappers shot dead: Police killed three suspected members of a kidnap gang when they stopped them at a roadblock, a senior police officer said yesterday. Reuter reports from Angap.

Egyptian newsman freed: An Egyptian journalist who had been detained for 20 days on charges of spreading Muslim fundamentalist ideas was freed on Wednesday, a leading member of the Labour Party said. AFP reports from Cairo.

Vietnamese skyjacker jailed: A Vietnamese boat person who tried to hijack the plane that was carrying him back home has been sentenced to 20 years in prison, a newspaper reported on Thursday. AP says from Hanoi.

US-Cuban talks open: A new round of US-Cuban talks on migration issues opened in New York Wednesday to review progress in the implementation of an accord reached last September. Xinhua reports from Washington.

Thunder claims 9 in Zimbabwe: A single lightning bolt killed nine people and seriously injured seven in a village in central Zimbabwe on Tuesday, police said on Wednesday. Reuter reports from Zimbabwe.

Major narrowly wins vote on EU fishing policy

LONDON, Jan 19: Prime Minister John Major narrowly won an important parliamentary vote on European Union fishing policy but almost immediately faced fresh pressure from rebels in his party over Britain's role in the EU, reports Reuter.

Major had a narrow majority of nine on Wednesday night's vote, enough to defeat an opposition motion attacking the government for its part in a decision by the European Union last month to open waters off western Britain to Spanish fishermen.

Ceasefire in Bosnia under renewed threat

SARAJEVO, Jan 19: A fragile ceasefire in Bosnia was under renewed threat after a Sarajevo teenager was wounded by a sniper as he frolicked in the snow and rival groups reopened dormant battle fronts, reports Reuter.

The 15-year-old boy was seriously wounded by a Serb sniper while sledding in the snow-covered capital in an incident condemned by UN peacekeepers as a serious breach of the three-week-old ceasefire.

"It's the most serious incident of that nature we have had in quite some time," UN spokesman Paul Riskey told a news conference on Wednesday. "We strongly deplore it."

In central Bosnia shells were fired on Wednesday for the first time since the Muslim-led government and Bosnian Serbs signed the truce on New Year's eve, a UN spokesman said.

Bosnian government troops fired some 20 artillery rounds towards Serb-held Donji Vakuf, Major Koos Sol said.

"It's significant because it has been very quiet in that area for almost two months now. We don't know why this happened but we're looking into it," Sol told Reuters.

Sporadic fighting was reported in the northwest Bihać enclave, where government troops and Bosnian Serb forces clashed to the west of Bihać town, with 21 artillery rounds registered by the United Nations.

Serb forces have been trying to seize a water reservoir supplying Bihać town from the government 5th corps who retook it in a surprise attack last Friday, Bosnian Serb sources said their forces had suffered heavy casualties in the fighting.

The UN brokered ceasefire was aimed at reviving talks to end the 33-month-long Bosnian war, but plans to deploy peacekeeping troops between the rival armies have been blocked by haggling over key provisions of the truce.

The United Nations said the Muslim-led army had failed to withdraw as promised from a demilitarised zone west of Sarajevo, and the Bosnian Serbs refused to open up roads into the city for civilian traffic in retaliation.

UN peacekeepers had been encouraged to believe after a helicopter reconnaissance flight on Tuesday that Bosnian army troops had withdrawn as promised from the zone.

But a French UN ground patrol spotted 80 armed government soldiers moving through the zone just after dark. "French battalion soldiers tried to stop these soldiers but despite warnings they continued southwards," said UN military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Gary Coward.

As the Serbs and Muslims battle, there were fresh signs on Wednesday of a rift among Bosnian Muslims and Croats who agreed in Vienna last year to form a federation.

A session of the Bosnian federation constituent assembly, scheduled for Wednesday morning, had to be postponed after Croat-Muslim talks ended in failure, the Croatian news agency Hina reported.

It said the main stumbling block was continued disagreement between the two sides on the rotation of the federal president. The Muslims and Croats differed in their interpretation of the Vienna agreement stipulating that the president must be rotated every six months.

Kurds threaten suicide attack on German targets

BONN, Jan 19: Kurdish separatist have threatened suicide attacks on German targets in Turkey in retaliation for Bonn's alleged support for Turkey's fight against Kurdish separatists, a Kurdish news agency said on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

The Cologne-based agency Kurd distributed a statement which it said had been issued on Tuesday by the People's Liberation Army of Kurdistan (ARGL).

"If Germany continues its share of the policy of destruction and annihilation in Kurdistan, ARGL units will attack economic and political targets. We will carry out suicide operations against German targets in Turkey and in Kurdistan," it said.

Major changes in Kumaratunga's security

COLOMBO, Jan 19: Major changes in the security provided to President Chandrika Kumaratunga are to be effected immediately following the discovery of unauthorised high explosives at her official residence, Sri Lankan security sources said today, reports Xinhua.

They said two non-commissioned officers had been arrested in this connection. Both are experienced field officers attached to the army's elite second battalion of the commando regiment.

The criminal investigations department and the military police are both conducting independent inquiries to see whether the two officers had any hostile intentions towards the president.

Iran world's number one N-threat: Hurd

LONDON, Jan 19: Iran is the world's number one nuclear threat in the post-Cold War era, British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd said on Wednesday, reports AFP.

He told the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee that Iran could have nuclear arms within seven to 15 years, according to estimates.

"We have suspicions, but not proof," that existing nuclear installations in Iran could be used for military purposes, he said.

Britain and other nations consider Iran the "main danger" of becoming a nuclear power, he said.

Last week, the International Atomic Energy Agency said in Vienna that it had no information on any secret nuclear activity in Iran that would violate Tehran's commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty which it signed in 1970.



A body is recovered from the ruins of a home on Thursday, two days after the earthquake measuring 7.2 on the Richter scale struck the city. More than 3,000 are confirmed dead. — AFP photo

US, UK, France defend use of economic sanctions

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 19: The United States, Britain and France on Wednesday defended the use of economic sanctions, taking issue with parts of a recent report by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, reports Reuter.

"Sanctions may be a blunt instrument, but they can be a useful one, and they are less blunt than the alternative which is, all too often, the use of military force," US Ambassador Madeleine Albright told the Security Council.

She was taking part in a debate on a report by the secretary-general on peacekeeping, peacemaking and related subjects.

One of his proposals was for the establishment of a UN mechanism to assess the effects of sanctions on the targeted country as well as on its trading partners and other countries which might suffer unintended harm.

Boutros-Ghali suggested the assessment should take place before the Council imposed the sanctions and then be continued, to enable the curbs to be fine-tuned so as to maximise their political effect and minimise what he called "collateral damage."

Britain's Sir David Hannay said the secretary-general was right to point up the problems raised by sanctions, but added that "the posing of paradoxes such as the conflict between sanctions and development, is hardly a sound basis for making difficult policy decisions."

A decision to impose sanctions presupposed a threat to international peace and security, which was itself inimical to the development of both the transgressor state and the victim.

Ambassador Jean-Bernard Merimee of France said that, on the subject of sanctions, his government was "not totally in agreement with the proposals of the secretary-general."

Experience showed sanctions should serve a precise objective and the criteria underlying their imposition, as well as their regular review, should be stipulated from the outset. But it was equally necessary to preserve the autonomous decision-making of the Security Council.

China sacks 500 officials for taking bribes

HONG KONG, Jan 19: Chinese authorities in southern Guangdong province kicked out more than 500 party and government officials found guilty of taking bribes in last year's anticorruption drive, it was reported today, says AFP.

Zhang Xuejun, Deputy Procurator of Guangdong Provincial People's Procuratorate, and head of the province's anti-graft bureau, told China-funded Ta Kung Pao that the officials were involved in some 400 cases of corruption in 1994.

These officials were all working in party, government, judicial, law enforcement, economic and trade offices, he said.

Zhang said the authorities had centred their anti-corruption campaigns in these departments and set up 232 anti-graft branches province wide.

Lankan monks demand apology from Pope

COLOMBO, Jan 19: On the eve of Pope John Paul II's arrival, more than 100 Buddhist monks marched in Colombo Thursday, demanding an apology from the pontiff for insulting this country's predominant religion, reports AP.

The robed monks caused a minor traffic snarl as they walked half a mile from the main railway terminal to President Chandrika Kumaratunga's office to hand over a letter of protest.

The letter warned that one monk, Mahaelagamwe Lankade, has threatened to immolate himself unless the Pope apologizes, and said the government would be held responsible for any trouble during the visit.

The government, trying to avoid involvement in the controversy has said the invitation to the Pope was made by the earlier administration that was defeated last August.

The president assured us that she would convey our concern the Pope before he arrives in Sri Lanka," said Ranasinghe Dhamawimala, a layman who accompanied four monks to hand over their protest.

In his book, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope," the Pope criticised the Buddhist practice of meditation to achieve enlightenment.

"Pope withdraw your distorted comments on Buddhism. Apology to Buddhist world before you arrive here," read one banner.

Meanwhile, Tamil rebels ferried more than 2,000 pilgrims in small boats from the Jaffna Peninsula at the start of their journey to Colombo, 300 kilometres to the south. On Wednesday about 900 pilgrims arrived from northern Sri Lanka, controlled by Tamil

Off the Record

... Until Clinton leaves White House

WASHINGTON: The woman charging President Bill Clinton with sexual harassment has filed an appeal to a court decision to defer the case until the president leaves the White House, reports AFP.

Paula Jones asked for a reversal Tuesday to the December 28 ruling which allows Clinton to delay responding to charges he sexually harassed her in 1991 when she was an Arkansas state employee and he was governor.

Jones, who is seeking 700,000 dollar in damage, said Clinton made unwanted sexual advances in a hotel during a convention in Arkansas. The president has denied the charges.

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A failed love is responsible

FLORIDA: Shot in the neck and paralysed, 11-year-old Adam Fowler managed to roll off the bed and onto his dead mother. His sister, Jessica, was able to crawl into the living room despite a bullet in her neck, reports AP.

For five days without food or water, they called out feebly and tried to make enough noise to attract neighbours' attention. Adam banged on the wall with a non-working telephone. Jessica, 13, struggled to turn on the television full blast.

When they weren't making noise, they prayed and encouraged each other to hang on.

Finally, on Tuesday, they were discovered after a concerned co-worker of the mother called police.

Investigators determined that Carrie Lee Rhodes, 38, had shot her children with a .357-caliber Magnum in a bedroom of their rented house, then killed herself with the gun.

Mrs Rhodes, a nurse, left a note saying she was depressed over a failed love affair and numerous money problems. Sgt Mike Holloway, a police spokesman, said Wednesday. She was divorced from the children's father.

One in seven Britons can barely read!

LONDON: One in seven Britons can barely read, write or do sums, a survey published today showed, reports Reuter.

The survey found many people in their 20s did worse than their parents when tested for literacy and numeracy.

The tests by an Adult Literacy and Basic Skills unit, a government-funded charity, showed 15 per cent of the 3,000 people tested had very poor results.

About one in 25 had very serious difficulties with reading an one in nine had limited competence.

Rabin to promise curb on Jewish settlement

JERUSALEM, Jan 19: Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in an effort to ally Palestinian militants with Jewish settlement building, will promise Yasser Arafat to curb new housing starts in the West Bank, Israeli newspapers said Thursday, reports AP.

Rabin and the Palestinian leader scheduled a meeting Thursday at the Erez checkpoint on the border between Israel and the PLO-ruled Gaza Strip to try to solve the settlement dispute.

Other issues on the agenda were the army pullout from West Bank cities that is required under the Israel-PLO accord and the release of Palestinian prisoners still held by Israel.

Rabin planned to propose to Arafat that troops pull out gradually, with soldiers first leaving relatively quiet cities such as Jenin and Bethlehem, while remaining in trouble-spots like Hebron, the Davar daily reported.

The PLO-Israel accord provides for a pullout of Israeli troops from Palestinian cities before self-rule elections.

PLO officials say Arafat would consider a phased pullout but insist elections can only take place once all soldiers have withdrawn.

Israeli reports said Rabin's government planned to release several hundred Palestinian prisoners in the near future. About 5,200 Palestinians are held in Israel, according to the Mandela Centre, a Palestinian human rights group.

ROK ruling party splits

SEOUL, Jan 19: In a blow to President Kim Young-sam, the number two man in South Korea's ruling party announced on Thursday that he had resigned, and aides said he would form a new conservative party, reports AP.

The president's popularity has been declining recently because of a series of policy failures.

Kim Jong-pil's resignation came after weeks of wrangling over leadership of the Democratic Liberal Party (DLP). Aides said he would form the new party in local council elections, scheduled for June.

The president, who leads the party, has reportedly sought to force Kim Jong-pil, a 69-year-old former army general, out.

Kim Jong-pil resisted, vehemently denouncing President Kim's leadership. The party chairman accused the president of lacking foresight in leading the country.

In 1990, the two Kim, each leading a splinter opposition group, joined then

Major narrowly wins vote on EU fishing policy

LONDON, Jan 19: Prime Minister John Major narrowly won an important parliamentary vote on European Union fishing policy but almost immediately faced fresh pressure from rebels in his party over Britain's role in the EU, reports Reuter.

Major had a narrow majority of nine on Wednesday night's vote, enough to defeat an opposition motion attacking the government for its part in a decision by the European Union last month to open waters off western Britain to Spanish fishermen.

Britain's treatment of asylum seekers is appalling

LONDON, Jan 19: A report Friday said Britain's treatment of political asylum seekers, refugees and migrants is appalling and accused the government of overall lack of concern for their rights, reports AP.

The report published by the human rights group Justice echo points in a report in October by Amnesty International which said Britain's practice of locking up large numbers of asylum seekers indefinitely without access to courts violates international law.

Friday's Justice report, published with the backing of a group called the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, said that an average of 1,500 people were detained under British deportation powers each year between 1989 and 1994.

The report, "The Last Resort: Violations of the Human Rights of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers," said "Detention of asylum seekers in often arbitrary and detainees are not always informed of the reason for their detention, nor given an automatic right to challenge it before a court of law."

"Detainees are held not only in immigration detention centres but also in prisons," it said.

The Justice report will be submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Committee which scrutinises the records of countries which have signed up to the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The committee will discuss Britain's record in July at the UN Centre for Human Rights in Geneva.

The report said some British regulations such as the "primary purpose rule" have led to families being kept apart and women being forced to choose between a violent home and deportation.

Under that rule, in a marriage between a national from outside the European Union and a British citizen, the onus is on the couple to show that the marriage is not principally to enable the foreign partner to obtain entry to Britain.

British immigration law does not give foreign husbands or wives of British citizens automatic right to remain in Britain.

The report said Home Secretary Michael Howard, the Cabinet member responsible for immigration among other matters, has discretionary powers to deport people if he considers it conducive to the public good. The report said this has led to arbitrary detentions and deportations on alleged grounds of national security, without the person involved having the right to be represented by a lawyers.

Andrew Puddephatt, general secretary of Liberty, said: "Without a Bill of Rights protecting fundamental human rights, the government's appalling treatment of immigrants and refugees is all the more difficult to challenge."

"Incarcerating asylum seekers with convicted criminals in prisons, and denying them proper appeal procedures, breaches international laws and is both inhuman and degrading."

Applications from asylum seekers wanting to live in Britain are growing. In March 1993, the number waiting for a decision by British officials was 42,170. By last September, it was 52,760.

Malaysia, which recycles and disposes of its toxic waste in the United States, last year ratified the Basel Convention on the control of transboundary movement of hazardous waste in Geneva, which the US has yet to sign.

KL, Washington to sign accord on toxic waste

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 19: Kuala Lumpur and Washington are set to sign an agreement next month to treat hazardous waste from Malaysian companies in accordance with internationally accepted standards, news reports said on Wednesday, says AFP.

Malaysia, which recycles and disposes of its toxic waste in the United States, last year ratified the Basel Convention on the control of transboundary movement of hazardous waste in Geneva, which the US has yet to sign.