

International

NZ welcomes Chirac's decision

France to wrap up N-tests in South Pacific by end of Feb

PARIS, Jan 5: France will wrap up its series of highly disputed nuclear tests in the South Pacific by the end of next month, French President Jacques Chirac confirmed on Thursday, reports AP.

France has staged five underground test blasts since Chirac abandoned a 3-year-old testing moratorium in September, sparking worldwide protests, and Chirac has said France will set off one or two more.

"France will complete its final campaign of nuclear tests before the end of February," Chirac said, confirming what other officials had indicated in the past.

Chirac spoke during a traditional New Year's reception for members of the French diplomatic corps, some of whom faced the wrath of anti-testing activists or foreign government officials.

The latest test was conducted December 27 at Mururoa Atoll, about 1,200 kilometres (750 miles) southeast of Tahiti in French Polynesia, to verify simulation

technology, officials said.

France also aims to verify the reliability of new and existing warheads with the tests.

Environmentalists, led by Greenpeace, contend the testing is needless and dangerous to the region known for its crystal waters and marine life, and could encourage other countries to resume testing. China has also staged recent tests.

Chirac noted France promises to sign an agreement on a nuclear weapons-free zone in the south Pacific — the so-called Rarotonga treaty — in the first six months of this year.

France also promises to sign a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty being negotiated in Geneva.

Meanwhile, New Zealand, a longtime vocal critic of French nuclear testing, on Friday welcomed confirmation by France that it will end underground blasts in the South Pacific in February.

France has detonated five nuclear tests beneath Mururoa and Fangataufa Atolls

since it abandoned a three-year-old testing moratorium in September, sparking worldwide protests.

Chirac said Thursday France will set off one or two more at its test site, about 1,200 kilometres (750 miles) southeast of Tahiti in French Polynesia.

Foreign minister Don McKinnon said New Zealand is "very glad to hear" Chirac's statement, which confirmed earlier comments by other French officials that the test series would be scaled back from an original eight blasts and will end in February instead of May, as first planned.

McKinnon said international protests against the French tests have been "beyond anything France contemplated and have had, I believe, a very salutary effect."

In Tahiti, Greenpeace campaigner Marc Dourneaux said the environmental group welcomed any news of an end to the tests, but one more detonation will "still be one too many."

114 Tamils die in refugee camps

COLOMBO, Jan 5: At least 114 Tamil civilians have died from diseases within the last two months at refugee camps in areas controlled by Tamil Tiger guerrillas in Sri Lanka's north, the rebel radio said today, reports AFP.

Malaria and diarrhoea were spreading in the camps, the radio said.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the victims died at Chavakachcheri and Killinochchi where they had taken shelter after rebels ordered them out of the northern town of Jaffna amid a major military offensive.

The army captured Jaffna, capital of a de facto state run by the LTTE since 1990, after nearly 50 days of fighting that left some 500 soldiers and an estimated 2,000 rebels dead.

Clinton to visit US troops in Bosnia soon

WASHINGTON, Jan 5: President Clinton will visit US troops in Bosnia "in a matter of days," the White House said on Thursday, but an exact date was not released, reports AP.

Press secretary Mike McCurry said the president will make the trip before the State of the Union Address, tentatively planned for January 23, and sometime after this weekend.

Fresh fighting in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Jan 5: Separatist fighters and Russian troops exchanged fire in several parts of Chechnya yesterday and today, causing casualties on both sides, the Russian military command in the breakaway region said, reports Reuters.

Interfax and ITAR-Tass news agencies quoted a spokesman at the military headquarters as saying one Russian soldier had been killed and 11 wounded in the last 24 hours.

The soldier who died was the victim of an attack on Thursday on an armoured personnel carrier which was blown up near a military checkpoint just outside the Chechen capital Grozny.

Conservatives seek to force out Dini

ROME, Jan 5: The political survival of Premier Lamberto Dini headed toward a showdown in Parliament next week when his centre-left backers said Thursday he should remain in power during Italy's six-month EU presidency, reports AP.

The statement came a day after a conservative coalition, which includes ex-premier Silvio Berlusconi, indicated Dini's non-elected government had run its course.

The legislative debate on the fate of Dini's year-old government is scheduled to begin Tuesday and last for several days.

Off the Record



German super model Claudia Schiffer poses for photos at the launch of her new fitness video The Claudia Schiffer Perfectly Fit workout Video in London on Thursday.

'Di worries' fail to detract Charles

LONDON: Worries about how much divorce cash Diana's lawyers will try to squeeze from him haven't detracted from the artistic side of Prince Charles' nature — nor his business acumen, reports AP.

Paintings by the prince, a talented amateur water-colourist, are to be reproduced on table place mats to raise money for charity, the Prince of Wales Charities Trust announced Thursday.

The mats, featuring alpine and Scottish mountain scenes, go on sale in the Swiss ski resort of Klosters at the end of the month and in Britain later this year at about 55 pounds (dls 84) a set.

Charles is currently on a skiing break at Klosters with his two sons, William, 13, and Harry, 11, and friends.

The prince is also staging an exhibition of 28 water-colours in Klosters to thank it for its hospitality over the last 18 years.

It was the prince's own idea to produce mats of his water-colours but, until now, these were for personal gifts to friends and staff, the trust said in a statement.

Two sets of six top-quality mats, showing eight scenes from Klosters and four from Scotland, will go on sale.

At first, they will be available only at the prince's Klosters art exhibition, which opens January 31 and runs until March 7, sponsored by a bank and an airline. The prince will visit the exhibition some time during its five-week run.

'Pest' trailing Anne around country

LONDON: Security has been stepped up around Britain's Princess Anne because a stalker has been trailing Queen Elizabeth's only daughter around the country, The Daily Telegraph newspaper said Friday, reports Reuters.

It did not name the suspect man but printed a picture of his smiling face on its front page. It said police circulated the photograph on Thursday among officials at Oxford University where the princess was speaking at a farming conference.

"He has, for some time, been somewhat obsessive and at some engagements the local constabulary (police) may be informed as a matter of routine," a spokesman for Buckingham Palace was quoted as saying.

The Telegraph said the man was described as a "pest" but had not done anything to suggest he intended to harm the princess.

Security is traditionally tight around Britain's royal family and, like movie stars and rock musicians, they have attracted stalkers before.

BRIEFLY



Former Miss Universe Irene Saez Conde prays at a mass on Thursday in Caracas before being sworn in as mayor of the Caracas municipality of Chacao. This is Saez Conde's second term as mayor of one of Caracas's most affluent areas.

Fahd may travel to Switzerland: King Fahd of Saudi Arabia who handed over power to his half brother, Crown Prince Abdullah, may travel to Switzerland in the next few days to have an operation on his knees, a report said Thursday, AFP reports from Nicosia.

Citing well informed Saudi sources, the Arabic language daily Al-Quds Al-Arabi said the 74-year-old ailing king "will travel abroad in coming days to receive treatment."

Chirac's popularity drops: French President Jacques Chirac's popularity dropped four percentage points in January, according to a poll released in this week's Figaro Magazine, AP reports from Paris.

According to the survey, 35 per cent of those polled have confidence in the conservative president, down from 39 per cent in December.

Iran executes 9 criminals: Eight men and a woman were hanged in Iran after being convicted of charges including kidnapping, drug smuggling and murder, a newspaper said on Thursday, Reuters AFP.

The Daily Kayhan said seven men and a woman, members of a criminal gang of 24, were hanged in a prison in the southern city of Kerman after a court convicted them of drug trafficking, armed robbery and kidnapping. Other gang members received prison terms of six to 11 years.

Cold weather claims 80 in Mexico: Snow, ice and freezing temperatures have killed more than 80 people and left thousands hospitalised in a recent cold wave that has spread south from the US border to the Yucatan Peninsula, AP reports from Monterrey, Mexico.

Papandreou's wife ill: Dimitra Liani-Papandreou, wife of ailing Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou, has hepatitis, Greek television reported Thursday, AFP reports from Athens.

Liani-Papandreou, 41, is being treated for hepatitis B, diagnosed after an examination at the Onassis Cardiology Centre in Athens, where her 76-year-old husband has been hospitalised since November 20, suffering from pneumonia.

50 Liberians killed in New Yr day: At least 50 civilians may fleeing rebels clashes in western Liberia, were killed in a New Year's Day massacre, authorities said Thursday, AP reports from Monrovia.

Survivors who fled to the capital of Monrovia said many more probably died of their wounds after escaping into the hills.

Talks with Syria may lead to early polls in Israel: Peres

JERUSALEM, Jan 5: Prime Minister Shimon Peres said on Thursday that peace talks with Syria might cause him to call elections earlier than his scheduled date next October, reports AP.

Peres told Israel Radio that in principle he wanted to serve out his term through October 29 "to promote the peace process." But he added that "there can be reasons... such as the negotiations with Syria" for calling them sooner.

"The situation in parliament is not stable," Peres noted.

Early elections could head off political costs entailed in a controversial peace treaty. They could also serve as a

kind of referendum on Peres plans to make peace with Syria.

The narrow coalition he inherited from Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated two months ago, is supported by only 63 out of 120 Knesset members.

Two members of Peres' Labour Party oppose a treaty with Syria that would require Israel to return the Golan Heights, which Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast war.

Although Peres is well ahead of all rivals in the polls, some of his advisors fear a painful deal with Syria might cost him the election. Still

others believe a Syria deal could be a political asset, especially if it is coigned by Arab leaders as Peres envisions.

Israel and Syria are currently negotiating in Maryland, and there are signs of progress in the talks. On Thursday, the Israeli media reported that Syria was willing to curb Lebanese guerrilla activity against Israel, a key Israeli demand.

Peres has said he is committed to Rabin's pledge to hold a referendum on a Golan deal. But he has also suggested he might consider elections in place of specific plebiscite.

Serbs free 16 civilians

Serbian Muslims demand autonomy

SARAJEVO, Jan 5: Muslims in Serbia are asking for autonomy, setting up a possible showdown between Serbia and Muslim-led Bosnia over the rights of minorities in each other's countries, reports AP.

The Serbian Muslims in the southern Sandzak region are trying to get Bosnia's government to take up their cause.

Many consider Bosnia their motherland. Its government has been issuing passports to Muslims from Sandzak since 1992, indicating they are considered citizens.

"We are asking the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina to request a parity of rights for its people in Yugoslavia, specifically in the Sandzak, with those enjoyed by Serbs in Bosnia," said Sulejman Ugljanin, a leader of

Sandzak's Muslims.

"There will be no stability in the region until the problem of the Sandzak is resolved justly," Ugljanin said in an interview Wednesday. "We are not asking for anything more than others have already got."

Under the peace treaty negotiated last month in Dayton, Ohio, the Serbs' republic of Srpska became one of two areas that make up Bosnia-Herzegovina and got broad autonomy.

Leaders of the 320,000 Muslims who make up two-thirds of the population of the Sandzak region want something similar.

Sandzak is a small stretch of land that straddles the Serb-Montenegrin border between Bosnia and Serbia's troubled Kosovo province, where the overwhelmingly Muslim Albanian population

also wants more autonomy.

Meanwhile, Serbs bowed to international pressure Thursday and freed 16 civilians detained near Sarajevo, resolving the first significant challenge to NATO's peace-keeping mission in the Balkans.

Most of the civilians, who were detained for up to two weeks, said they had no complaints about their treatment by Serbs while in custody. But three men, who had bruises on their faces, reported being beaten.

For Bosnians, the experience was proof that despite the deployment of a NATO-led force to end 3 and a half years of war, it still is too dangerous to travel unescorted through Serb-held territory. For the international authority that is to ensure peace, it exposed an embarrassing rift

Claims for US political asylum drops by 57pc

WASHINGTON, Jan 5: Claims for US political asylum dropped by 57 per cent from 1994-95 after officials made it tougher for asylum-seekers to find work, a key magnet for would-be immigrants, the top US immigration official said on Thursday, reports AP.

By refusing to grant working papers automatically to all asylum-seekers, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) "has removed the primary incentive for baseless asylum claims," INS Commissioner Doris Meissner said.

"With this attack on fraud, we have closed a back door to illegal immigration," she told a news conference.

Meissner cited a year-on-year drop in US asylum claims from 122,589 in the 1994 calendar year to 53,255 in 1995, following implementation of streamlined asylum procedures that took

effect one year ago.

Other key changes mandated by the Clinton administration in July 1993 include a requirement that all asylum applicants must appear in person to receive notice of decisions on their cases.

Critics have long singled out the asylum process as especially in need of reform, citing better-paying US jobs than many foreign nationals could find at home as a magnet for fraudulent asylum claims.

"In 1993, the asylum system seemed to totally break down," said Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which advocates reduced immigration levels.

"It was a joke before. Now it's just not working very well," he said, citing the continuing influx of undocumented aliens and slow-grinding bureaucracy in which asylum petitions and deportations still frequently stall.

Basu becoming PM or not," he added. "We as a party will join only those governments, in the centre or in states, whose policies we can influence."

"The question whether Jyoti Basu can become PM or not has nothing to do with us," Karat said. "It is emanating from outside (our party)."

But centrist politicians, whose the possibility of coming out on top along with the communists in the event of a widely-tipped hung parliament, have not given up hope.

"Jyoti Basu is a senior statesman, an experienced, sensible and capable leader," said Sharad Yadav, a vocal



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat dances and waves with his Koufeia to his supporters during his first election campaign rally in Khann-younes in the Gaza Strip on Thursday. Arafat is candidate for the seat of president of the Palestinian authority. Palestinian elections are due to be held January 20.

Arabs adopt code of conduct to fight terrorism

TUNIS, Jan 5: Interior ministers of Arab states adopted a code of conduct Thursday aimed at fighting terrorism, the chairman of the meeting, Arabia's Prince Nayif Ibn Abdelaziz, said late Thursday, reports AP.

The code commits members of the Arab League to refraining from aiding, encouraging, harbouring, training or arming terrorist groups.

Prince Nayif said the code was approved unanimously by the Iraqi delegation said Iraq had reservations, as it wanted a proposed "Arab strategy" against terrorism to be approved at the same time.

Secular opposition pushing Jyoti Basu as possible premier?

NEW DELHI, Jan 5: India's secular opposition is pushing a veteran communist as a possible premier in the event of a victory in upcoming general elections, but the political stalwart is cool to the idea, reports AP.

Leaders of the country's main centrist party, the Janata Dal (People's Party), say Marxist Jyoti Basu should be the choice to head a government in case the centre-left coalition wins the hustings only months away.

Even the business community is not averse to the proposal since Basu, 81, who has been chief minister of the eastern state of West Bengal since 1977, is considered a pragmatist who regu-

larly woos Indian and foreign capital.

The Jyoti Basu, who embraced Marxism while studying law in London during the British Raj and whose only son is a successful businessman, has remained silent to the appeals to play a more active role in national politics.

His hardline Communist Party of India (Marxist), the country's dominant leftist group and die-hard admirer of Stalin, refuses however to permit Basu to head a "bourgeois" government.

"The question does not arise," CPI (M) spokesman Prakash Karat said. "We have ruled out such a possibility. It is not a question of

Basu becoming PM or not," he added. "We as a party will join only those governments, in the centre or in states, whose policies we can influence."

"The question whether Jyoti Basu can become PM or not has nothing to do with us," Karat said. "It is emanating from outside (our party)."

But centrist politicians, whose the possibility of coming out on top along with the communists in the event of a widely-tipped hung parliament, have not given up hope.

"Jyoti Basu is a senior statesman, an experienced, sensible and capable leader," said Sharad Yadav, a vocal

centrist MP, "naturally, when one thinks of prime minister material, he comes to mind."

Three prominent centrist politicians — Biju Patnaik, Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav — are all for Basu, chiefly because of his ability to cobble together a coalition in his home state for 17 years.

Even the smaller Communist Party of India, from which Basu broke away in 1964, wants him in New Delhi.

Basu's admirers want his name put forward as a consensus choice for the top post well ahead of the parliamentary elections expected in April to project a stable government in New

Delhi.

Only the Bharatiya Janata Party, B.J.P. (Indian People's Party), which aspires to come to power on its own, has no love for Basu. The communists and right-wing Hindu B.J.P. are sworn enemies.

New Delhi has been ruled since independence in 1947 by the Congress Party, now headed by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, barring two brief spells when centrist catapulted to power.

On both occasions, the governments collapsed because of infighting. Basu is seen to have the ability to keep rival factions together.

The Times of India, one of

the country's most respected newspapers, said in a recent commentary that the chase for Basu revealed a transformation of national attitudes.

"In an ironic u-turn of history, after liberal democracy has scripted the end of communism, the man most sought after by the disparate opposition to become Prime Minister is a Marxist," it said.

"He is a national leader in terms of his influence over governments at the centre since 1977," it added. "In the post-cold war period, Basu has shown remarkable adaptability."

Yeltsin discusses cabinet changes with Chernomyrdin

MOSCOW, Jan 5: President Boris Yeltsin, keeping an active schedule since returning to work last week, on Thursday discussed government changes with his prime minister and threatened to fire some of his hand-picked regional representatives, reports AP.

The meeting with Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin was devoted to analysing the results of December's parliamentary elections, in which Communists and nationalists dominated over reformers and other Yeltsin loyalists.