

BRIEFLY



International

US urges Chechens to free hostages

Kremlin ready to quit Chechnya to end hostage drama : Yeltsin

PARIS, Jan 12: President Boris Yeltsin said on Thursday the Kremlin was ready to withdraw all its troops from Chechnya to defuse a three-day hostage seizure by rebels, but only if the rebels agreed to abandon the use of armed force, reports Reuter.

Speaking after meeting President Jacques Chirac, he said: "There are talks going on inside Chechnya. As soon as they (the rebels) agree on not using weapons we will withdraw our troops. Only the police will remain to maintain public order."

Yeltsin was speaking on the steps of the Elysee Palace after being asked by a Russian reporter what measures he was taking to end the hostage seizure by Chechen rebels in neighbouring Dagestan.

It was not immediately clear to which talks inside Chechnya he was referring.

The Kremlin position is that it is up to the Moscow-backed government of Doku Zavgavayev to negotiate within Chechnya.

Moscow originally promised to withdraw most of its troops last July but the partial military accord it negotiated with the rebels led by Dzhokhar Dudayev effectively broke down in October and no talks have taken place since then.

Russia has always insisted that the rebels lay down their arms. It was not clear if Yeltsin's remarks represented just a repetition of this long-standing position or something new.

Meanwhile, talks resumed today between Chechen gunmen holding some 200 hostages in a southern Russian village and Dagestani regional and military officials. ITAR-Tass news agency said.

It said the talks, aimed at breaking a stalemate of almost two days in which the rebels have been held up by Russian forces in the village of Pervomayskaya, resumed at 7 am (0400 GMT).

The rebels of the "Lone Wolf" group raided the Dagestani town of Kizlyar on Tuesday, seized a hospital and took some 2,000 hostages. They left the following day in a convoy of buses after releasing most of their captives.

The gunmen, led by Salman Raduyev, are demanding safe passage into Chechnya from the neighbouring region of Dagestan but have said they will not leave without a "human shield" of journalists, aid workers and politicians.

Russian military commanders and Dagestani negotiators insist the rebels must release their hostages.

Russian forces on Thursday tightened a ring of armour around Pervomayskaya, which is just short of the border.

AFP adds from Washington, the United States called on Chechen rebels in southern Russia on Thursday to release hostages held for two days but also urged Moscow to exercise restraint in dealing with the crisis.

"We condemn the hostage-taking which has cost and endangered the lives of innocent citizens," said State Department spokeswoman Anne Johnson.

Chechen fighters commandeered buses carrying some 2,000 people in the Dagestani town of Kizlyar on Tuesday but most of the captives were released the following day.

Deuba for peace, cooperation in South Asia

KATHMANDU, Jan 12: Nepali Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba yesterday called for regional cooperation and peace in the South Asian subcontinent, reports Xinhua.

Addressing the opening of the Rotary International South Asia Conference on Cooperation and Development here today, Deuba said South Asia was one of the least developed regions in the world and there could be no development without regional cooperation and peace.

Nepal adheres to its policy of maintaining peace and posterity goodwill with all the countries in the world, especially its neighbours, Deuba said.

He said the emergence of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) had brought in a new era of cooperation and development among south Asian countries.

Chirac offers to send troops to Syria, Lebanon

PARIS, Jan 12: French President Jacques Chirac offered on Thursday to send French troops to Syria and Lebanon if requested to help guarantee peace agreements with Israel, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres said, reports Reuter.

Asked if France was willing to send troops to the Golan Heights after an Israeli withdrawal, Peres told reporters: "The French president said that if it would be necessary, France would be prepared to participate with a guarantee of security."

He said the exact nature of the guarantee had not been discussed but, in response to another question, said Chirac had expressed willingness to send troops to both Syria and Lebanon.

Israel and Syria are conducting talks with US mediation on a peace agreement under which the Jewish state would withdraw from the Golan Heights captured in the 1967 Middle East war. Washington has also offered to send troops to guarantee peace.

Thatcher attacks left-wing of her party

LONDON, Jan 12: In a scathing attack on the left-wing of her Conservative Party, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said Thursday the Tories best chance for reelection was to keep steering right, reports AP.

Thatcher believes the reigning power in Kabul should be dealt with while Pakistan believes Rabbani's legitimacy expired more than a year ago when his two-year tenure ended, the spokesman said.

He said Velayati's visit had resulted in "better appreciation" of the situation and a "better understanding of each other's position" on the Afghan problem.

"Things are very very positive," he said, adding that the Iranian foreign minister's trip was to allay any misunderstanding between the two countries.

"It is not even in consonance with Rabbani's own statement that he would step down and transfer power to an interim administration," he added.

"We have both identified our interest in peace," he said.

Muslims in Bosnia want US peacekeepers to stay for good

CELIC, Bosnia, Jan 12: The Muslims in this muddy mountain village, high in Bosnia's craggy mountains, cheered this week when an armoured US army column rolled through and ran straight into a dead-end at a walled cow pen, reports Reuter.

They wanted the soldiers to stay for good.

He wished for a conference with President Bill Clinton might want to stop by when he visits Bosnia this weekend. But he will never come near a place where every male between the age of 16 and 70 carries a weapon.

A November 13 car-bombing outside the offices of US military trainers killed five Americans and two Indians.

Too bad for him. His sponsorship of a plan to end the war may be controversial at home, but its wins high marks in beleaguered Celic.

This remote village lies next to the dividing line between Bosnian government and Serb-held territory, a no-man's land of mines, mortars, machineguns and cannon.

The dozing cow took little notice of the noisy military vehicles as they clanked up the muddy lanes of northeast Bosnia.

An old woman on the top floor of a shell-shattered house on the narrow lane wept at the sight. Children jumped and waved in the

slush-and mud-filled street as the convoy crawled by. The men raised their hands with V for victory salutes, offering soldiers cigarettes and plum brandy.

The only English-speaker in the crowd shouted "Americans stay, Russians go," a message that when translated drew laughs and applause.

The people here are fearful of the arrival soon of a 1,500-man Russian brigade that will join the 60,000-member NATO force to enforce the fragile US-designed peace plan.

They feel the Russians, who are due to start arriving

on Friday, will be too close to their traditional friends the Serbs a few kilometres (miles) away over the hills.

For 3 and half years, the two sides tried to drive each other out and the Muslims fear the Russians may let the fighting resume.

The US commander of the Italy-based 3-325 airborne combat team battalion in Bosnia, Lieutenant-Colonel Curtis Scaparrotti, led the column into the dead-end on the bad advice of Bosnian army scout who chose a wrong turn.

Backing the bulky combat trucks and humvee jeeps out

of the tiny alleys took half an hour or more, with the good-natured help of the villagers.

But for the uneasy and tired troops in the column, the unannounced visit and the sincerity of the greeting was a pleasant break in their rolling tour of "one messed-up country," as humvee jeep driver Corporal Warren Johnston put it.

As the column rolled for 10 hours one day this week up and down the dividing line through Serb and Muslim-held towns, Serb soldiers appeared for the most part to be happy to see them, rising from the trenches and bunkers to get a look at the

American.

Lieutenant Joel Krauss, who interprets for Scaparrotti, was sceptical.

"Maybe we won't make much difference here. Who

knows. Let's see a year from now when we are supposed to go home."

Off the Record



US actor David Hasselhoff is hugged by his 3-year-old daughter Hayley Amber on Thursday during a ceremony honoring him with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Hasselhoff stars in the internationally syndicated "Baywatch," the most watched television show in the world, is seen in 144 countries and watched by more than one billion viewers a week.

— AFP UNB photo

Demotion from councillor to street sweeper!

BUENOS AIRES: An Argentine small-town councillor who lost her seat was given new duties as a street sweeper by the winners of the election, reports Reuter.

Alcira Florentin De Yelem of the Peronist Party started sweeping on Monday, wearing a large sign around her neck saying "Former Peronist town Councillor," the state-owned Telam news agency reported on Thursday.

The new radical party administration of the town of Wanda denied they had made Florentin De Yelem sweep streets out of malice, arguing it was the only job she was capable of doing.

"She doesn't even know how to type," said Armando Kallsten, the new mayor.

Wedding in a circus party

BOGOTA, Colombia: He dropped his pants in front of university students. He went on television clutching a giant carrot replica. Now Bogota's maverick mayor wants to get married — in a circus, reports AP.

Mayor Antanas Mockus, a 43-year-old political outsider who won the 1994 election in a landslide, is planning to wed January 28. The bride, Adriana Cordoba, is a 26-year-old student.

The plans are grandiose — 3,000 guests, clowns, elephants and other circus animals.

Because it is Mockus' second marriage, a church wedding is not allowed by the Roman Catholic church. Instead, the couple will be married in a civil ceremony.

Mockus, an unabashed eccentric, first gained fame as rector of Colombia's National University, where he dropped his pants and showed his buttocks to students at a meeting.

As mayor, he hired music bands and street mimes to teach citizens to respect traffic laws. He adopted the carrot as a symbol of clean living for the holiday season, appearing on television with a stuffed carrot replica or eating the real thing.

There may be snags in the wedding plans.

One circus offered its big top but is scheduled to leave town before the wedding.

'Cheese, jagged teeth — were clues for nabbing him

BUDAPEST: A jagged bite in a discarded piece of cheese gave teeth to a longstanding manhunt for a serial thief, police said Thursday, reports AFP.

Police in the western Hungarian border town of Koszeg arrested a man for a string of thefts after noticing his jagged teeth, the MTI news agency said.

The man's detention reminded them of the imprint on a piece of uneaten cheese found at a restaurant that had earlier been robbed, police officer Robert Nemeth said.

The suspect had only to smile before detectives began a search of his house for stolen goods, Nemeth said. He was arrested as soon as he said "cheese," Nemeth said, adding that he later admitted to the thefts.

Al-Faran shifts hostages to warmer Jammu region

JAMMU, India, Jan 12: Separatist guerrillas have shifted their four Western hostages south to escape the bitter cold of the Kashmir winter, officials said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

They said Al-Faran militants had moved the four tourists, now in their seventh month of captivity, from the high, cold hills of the Kashmir Valley to the lower, warmer Jammu region.

"Because of severe cold in Kashmir, they have shifted them to Jammu," said a government official who asked not to be identified.

The tourists and their captors have been sighted by local residents from time to time. They were seen in the Jammu region in October but by late last month were back in the valley, near the spot where they were kidnapped in July.

American Donald Hutchings, German Dirk Hasert and Britons Keith Mangan and Paul Wells were apparently in good health and guarded by dozens of armed militants when seen in December.

The Press Trust of India said there were reports the hostages had been shifted to the Doda-Udhampur areas of the Jammu region, more than 100 km (60 miles) from the Anantnag district of the Kashmir Valley where they were recently seen.

Al-Faran is one of dozens of separatist groups fighting Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir state. The group headed a fifth hostage. Norwegian Hans Christian Osto, who was found in a remote Kashmiri forest in mid-August.

After kidnapping the tourists, the shadowy militants demanded that India release some 15 jailed separatists including three Pakistanis.

India refused but ruled out a rescue raid for fear of endangering the hostages.

Israel releases 230 Palestinian prisoners

NABLUS, West Bank, Jan 12: Under tight security, 230 Palestinian prisoners convicted of killing collaborators with Israel were released Thursday from Israeli jails, reports AP.

Half a dozen jeeps and police cars escorted a bus carrying 43 freed prisoners to the Nablus police station, where a senior Palestinian police official warned them of the danger of revenge attacks from the relatives of their victims.