

Chechens open fresh talks with officials

Yeltsin proceeds with cabinet reshuffle amid hostage crisis

MOSCOW, Jan 13: While all eyes were focused on the hostage drama in southern Russia, where dozens of Chechen guerillas continued to hold more than 100 captives on Friday, president Boris Yeltsin quietly proceeded with reshuffling his Cabinet, reports AP.

Changes in the government were widely expected following the victory of Communists and nationalists in December's parliamentary vote and Yeltsin's need to appease the new legislature ahead of the June presidential race.

The most significant fall-out so far has been the resignation of Andrei Kozyrev, Russia's pro-Western foreign minister who was elected to the new parliament. By law, legislators cannot combine government and parliament jobs.

Earlier this week, Yeltsin named Yevgeny Primakov, the head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, as the

new foreign minister. The appointment of this Soviet-era survivor and a Middle East expert known for his pro-Iraqi stance during the Gulf War indicated that Russia intends to take a tougher, East-oriented foreign policy line.

Yeltsin has also dismissed Transportation Minister Vitaly Yefimov and approved the resignation of three officials who had quit to take seats in parliament — privatization chief Sergei Belyayev, minister without portfolio Nikolai Travkin and Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Shakhara.

On Friday, Yeltsin named Nikolai Tsakh, 57, a veteran Soviet and Russian marine transport official, to replace Yefimov as the transportation minister, the presidential press service said.

In a separate decree signed Friday, Yeltsin fired Agriculture Minister Alexan-

der Nazarkchuk and appointed Vice Prime Minister Alexander Zaverukha as acting agriculture minister.

Reuter adds, Chechen separatist rebels opened fresh talks with officials in the Dagestan region today and asked for safe passage back to their north Caucasus homeland. ITAR-Tass news agency said, quoting the local Interior Ministry.

The Dagestan Ministry said the rebels, who are holding more than 100 hostages in a village near the Chechen border, were no longer making political demands. But the talks were not easy, the ministry added.

A stand-off between Russian forces and a group of Chechen rebels holding over 100 hostages in a freezing field in the north Caucasus goes into the third day with little sign of a breakthrough.

President Boris Yeltsin underscored the problem he is facing five months before a presidential election — he

badly needs to avoid a blood-bath but cannot afford to let the rebels escape.

The head of the Russian region of Dagestan, Magomedali Magomedov, said Yeltsin told him by telephone: "We will search for the most acceptable variant."

"There is nothing more precious for us than human lives," the president said. "Magomedov told ITAR-Tass news agency, outside the village of Pervomayskaya after talks with the group of Chechen separatist gunmen which calls itself 'Lone Wolf'."

"But at the same time we cannot let the bandits go unpunished."

A convoy of buses in which more than 200 rebels have been holding over 100 hostages has been stranded outside Pervomayskaya, near the border between Chechnya and Dagestan, since Wednesday.

Tass said talks between the rebels and Dagestani and Russian officials would resume in the morning.

Primakov to defend Russia's status as great power

MOSCOW, Jan 13: Russia's new Foreign Minister and former spy chief Yevgeny Primakov vowed Friday to defend the country's status as a "great world power" and called for an equal partnership with the west, reports AFP.

Primakov, who was appointed Tuesday, told reporters that the Foreign Ministry should also aim for further economic integration with former Soviet republics.

He said Russia "was and remains a great world power and its (foreign) policy must conform to that status."

"I see my appointment as the need to strengthen the Foreign Ministry's efforts to protect Russia's national interests," Primakov said.

Despite President Boris Yeltsin's assertion that foreign policy would not change under Primakov, the appointment has already been viewed as a change of direction following the generally pro-western line pursued by Kozyrev.

Primakov said the sovereignty of the 15 former Soviet republics, 12 of which are in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)

"cannot negate the need for economic integration."

Referring to relations with the west, he called for "partnership ties with former enemies on condition that the partnership is equal and mutually advantageous."

"We won the Cold War together and in that war there were no winners' and no losers," he said.

Primakov's appointment followed months of criticism of the Foreign Ministry from Russian communists and nationalists, who accused the government of weakness in the face of NATO's attacks on Bosnia. Serb forces and plans to expand eastward to embrace Moscow's former Soviet bloc allies.

Primakov said he was against any "deterioration in the geopolitical situation," warning that NATO expansion would be "counter-productive."

He said Russian ratification of the START-II nuclear disarmament treaty depended on adherence to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty.



Chechen field commander Salman Raduyev calls with a satphone while his guardians stand close to him in the village of Pervomaysk on Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

UN extends mandate in Georgia: The Security Council on Friday extended by six months the mandate of the UN mission that monitors a shaky ceasefire in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. AP reports from United Nations.

About 136 UN observers from 23 countries, along with 3,000 Russian peacekeepers, are monitoring the truce between the Georgian government and Abkhazian separatists.

Clinton leading in opinion polls: President Clinton held an advantage over Bob Dole in two national polls, although the same surveys showed widespread concern about the economy and the Clintons' truthfulness. AP reports from New York.

In a CNN-Time magazine poll of 829 voters Wednesday and Thursday pitting Clinton against Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, 47 per cent said they would vote for Clinton and 41 per cent favored Dole.

Chirac's popularity rises: French President Jacques Chirac's popularity jumped ten percentage points following remarks he made in praise of his predecessor, the late Francois Mitterrand, according to a poll released Friday. AP reports from Paris.

The poll was taken from January 10 to January 11, two days after Chirac made an unusually warm and personal speech in honor of former President Francois Mitterrand, who died Monday of cancer.

5 Russian women reach South Pole: An expedition of five Russian women became the second to reach the South Pole in 1996, a news agency reported Friday. AP reports from Moscow.

The woman's expedition, named Metelitsa, reached the South Pole on Thursday at 8 pm Moscow time (5 pm GMT). Interfax said. The news was relayed by a radio operator in Chile. The expedition includes Lyudmila Titova, Tatiana Kuznetsova, Antonina Yegorova, all of Moscow; Olga Fedotkina of Zelenograd; and Svetlana Zubkova of Nizny Novgorod.

Christopher arrives in Israel: US Secretary of State Warren Christopher arrived in Israel on Friday from Syria where President Hafez Al-Assad agreed to an Israeli request that military experts join new peace talks. Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

After a four-and-a-half hours meeting with Assad, Christopher told a news conference that Syria and Israel had agreed to expand their negotiations set to resume in the United States on January 24.

Strike to protest Kashmir leader's killing observed

SRINAGAR, Jan 13: Shops and government offices in Kashmir closed on Friday in response to a strike call by a major local political coalition to protest the killing of a separatist guerrilla leader, reports Reuter.

Police said Sajad Ahmad Kenoo, the head of the Jammu and Kashmir Islamic Front, was killed on Monday in a clash with Indian paramilitary troops on the outskirts of Srinagar.

Family members maintain he was executed by police after being detained at a house in the area.

The Jammu and Kashmir Islamic Front claimed responsibility for two recent bomb attacks in New Delhi, including the January 3 blast in the Qutub road old quarter

which killed seven people and injured more than 30.

"We appeal to people to observe complete strike in protest against the custodial killing of Sajad Kenoo," a Hurriyat press release said.

Streets were deserted except for an occasional vehicle and security men patrolling main roads.

Hurriyat said the strike was also in protest at "the grave human rights violation by Indian forces in Jammu and Kashmir."

Hurriyat is a coalition of 30 Kashmiri political and religious parties and groups.

More than a dozen militant groups are fighting Delhi's rule in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state.

UN Afghan envoy in Pakistan to resume talks

ISLAMABAD, Jan 13: Rebels fired rockets at the Afghan capital Kabul on Friday, killing at least two people, as UN special envoy Mahmoud Mestiri arrived in neighbouring Pakistan to resume his peace mission, reports Reuter.

The Taliban Islamic militia fired at least six rockets into Kabul's residential areas, also wounding three people and damaging houses, the official Kabul Radio said.

Friday's attack followed another on Thursday when Kabul radio said the militia seeking to topple President Burhanuddin Rabbani fired 14 rockets on the capital, killing five people and wounding 20.

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Yemen expels 7,500 illegal immigrants

CAIRO, Jan 13: Yemen has expelled 7,500 illegal immigrants as part of a campaign against foreign Islamic fundamentalists in the country. Yemeni Interior Minister Hussein Arab said in comments published on Friday, reports AFP.

He told the Arabic daily newspaper Al Hayat that most of those expelled came from Arab countries, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and the Horn of Africa, but did not say when they had been ordered to leave.

Another report from Sanaa says, a French delegation arrived on Friday in Sanaa to mediate in a conflict between Yemen and Eritrea over a Red Sea island.

Led by Francis Gutmann, former secretary general of foreign affairs, the French team has also visited Ethiopia and Egypt.

Major fans flames of his party conflict

LONDON, Jan 13: Prime Minister John Major fanned the flames of conflict in his ruling Conservative Party on Friday when he bluntly rejected a call by his predecessor, Margaret Thatcher, for a return to her right wing agenda, reports Reuter.

Speaking a day after Thatcher reopened party wounds with her first domestic speech since she was ousted in an internal party vote in 1990, he also repudiated her claim that the conservatives were betraying their core middle-class supporters.

"The incentives and opportunities are there," an irritated Major told reporters in his constituency in eastern England.

Khun Sa men hand over arms factory to Myanmar troops

YANGON, Jan 13: Guerrillas loyal to opium warlord Khun Sa, who surrendered last week, handed over a weapons factory and large ammunition dump to government troops, Myanmar's state news agency reported today, says Reuter.

The arms factory and ammunition depot, which contained almost 10,000 rounds for heavy weapons, 8,000 mines and 12,000 hand grenades, was handed over to Burmese government troops on Tuesday, the Myanmar news agency said.

More than 5,000 guerrillas from Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army had now "returned to the legal fold," the agency said.



US President Bill Clinton greets guests at a fund raiser held for the Clinton-Gore '96 campaign at the Opryland Hotel on Friday in Nashville, Tennessee. Clinton spent the day touring a Peterbilt truck factory before flying to Bosnia. — AFP/UNB photo

Tehran plans to hit Jewish targets

Iran accuses US of keeping Asian nations divided

BOMBAY, Jan 13: Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati accused the United States on Friday of keeping Asia divided and said Asian countries should rally together on the economic front and bury their quarrels, reports Reuter.

Closer economic cooperation could help draw the continent together, solve old disputes and dampen new tensions, Velayati said at the start of a three-day visit to India.

"Economic cooperation and partnership will reduce tensions and ... give rise to persistent stability and tranquility," he told the confederation of Indian industry in Bombay.

He accused the US of trying to keep Asia divided. "This is the policy of the US to make difficulties for the

countries in this region ... they have tried to deepen the differences and rift between countries," he said.

He condemned recent moves by the US Congress to allocate up to 20 million dollars for covert action against Iran, which he said infringed international law, and he vowed to defeat them.

"What the Americans are trying to do is against international law," Velayati told reporters.

"This policy will fail and be totally defeated," he said.

India's relations with Pakistan, troubled by arms sales by the US and always prickly because of the "two nations" dispute over Kashmir, could be helped by economic cooperation, he said.

"We have always been against any kind of militarisation of this sensitive region,"

Velayati said.

AP adds from Jerusalem: Iran, apparently fearing an attack by Israel, had plans drawn up to bomb Israeli military installations and to assassinate Israeli and Jewish officials in various countries around the world, a television report said Friday.

The plans were detailed in what is believed to be an Iranian intelligence document obtained by Israel Television.

The document was drawn up after Israel convicted an Israeli of spying for the Islamic country, a sworn enemy of Israel, and Iran feared harsh retaliation from the Jewish state, the broadcast said. It said the plans would be carried out if Israel attacked.



Residents of Washington, DC, dig out as it snowed again on Friday on top of the 17 inches that fell earlier in the week. — AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record

A bite to beat rapist

VANCOUVER, Canada: A woman escaped from an alleged rapist here by biting his penis and then running into a forest where she hid until a police car passed by. It was reported Friday, says AFP.

In testimony Thursday before the supreme court of British Columbia, the unidentified woman said she was picked up by John Patrick Dutcher March 26, 1995 while hitch-hiking.

Dutcher took the 31-year-old woman to the entrance of a provincial park, parked his van and locked its doors, she testified.

When Dutcher lowered his pants and tried to rape her, the woman bit his penis, she said.

"After I bit his penis... he started punching me in the face. Then, he curled up on the floor on the passenger side," she said.

She ran into the forest and emerged when a police car drove by.

Mitterrand chose the day of his death!

PARIS: Former president Francois Mitterrand, suffering from cancer, prepared meticulously for the end of his life and even chose the day of his death, friends and associates said on Friday, reports Reuter.

"A few days before his death, he told me, 'now I have by philosophy,'" Roland Dumas, a close Mitterrand friend and former foreign minister, told RRANCE 2 Television.

Last Saturday, Mitterrand, who had waged a long battle with prostate cancer, asked his doctor Jean-Pierre Tarot what would happen if he stopped taking all drugs except painkillers, according to the French daily Le Monde.

Tarot responded he would be dead within three days. The newspaper said Mitterrand stopped treatments that day. Mitterrand died on Monday morning, aged 79. He had left office eight months earlier after a record 14 years as French president during which he fought for European Unity.

On the eve of his death, Mitterrand delivered a handwritten three-page letter to Longtime associate Andre Rouselet, providing detailed instructions for his funeral.

1000 yr old turtles discovered

YUDU: A pair of 1,000-year-old soft-shelled turtles have been caught in Yudu, in central China's Jiangxi province, the Shanghai-based Xinhua Evening News reported, says Xinhua.

The male turtle, weighing 21 kg, was discovered by a rural doctor by a reservoir here. Thinking that it was a big rock, he sat on it. The rock, however, started to move.

The female turtle, weighing 25.5 kg, was caught subsequently after three days of searching by a farmer who specialises in breeding turtles.

Blizzard forces offices to close

Clinton contends budget deal within easy reach

NASHVILLE, Tenn, Jan 13: Saying a balanced budget is within easy reach, President Clinton pressed Republicans Friday for an agreement locking in major spending cuts while putting aside big disputes on major issues until after the November election, reports AP.

"Let us be honest with the American people what we disagree on and let the American people make their decision in November," Clinton told a factory audience here. He said both sides should put on hold disputes over cutting taxes, federal health care programmes.

Another report from Washington says, a day after federal workers trudged through a mountain of snow to face a mountain of work, fresh snowfall forced government offices in Washington to close again Friday.

Washington bureaucrats had hoped to chip away at the backlog that accumulated during more than three weeks of partial shutdown due to the budget impasse and the blizzard that hit the east coast of the United States.

But Thursday's back-to-work rush hour was torture for commuters.

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Ethnic Nepalese step up campaign to return to Bhutan

JHAPA, Nepal, Jan 13: Not far from Mount Everest, 100,000 refugees live in snake- and leech-infested camps as exiles from the Land of the Thunder Dragon, reports AP.

Six years ago, they were driven out of Bhutan, a tiny, unspoiled land of green mountains that travel books describe as the last Shangri-la.

On Sunday, 150 of them will begin a 23-day, 400-kilometre (250-mile) march from their camps in Nepal, across India and up the Himalayan Mountains to Bhutan's capital, Thimphu, where they will ask King Jigme Wangchuk to let them return.

It is doubtful they will finish, and even if they do, the

king is unlikely to grant their request. The refugees are caught in a battle over whether there is room for diversity in Bhutan.

The refugees are ethnic Nepalese whose families have immigrated to Bhutan to find work and fields to farm. They are mostly Hindu, and they wear different clothes and speak a different language from the Drukpa majority.

When Bhutan tried to force them to adopt the ways of the majority, they resisted and were driven out, fleeing to eastern Nepal.

Dali Ram Kharel, 22, was a student in Bhutan in 1992 when his father sent a message to his dormitory saying his family was being forced out of the country. "I was left alone there, so I decided to leave," he said.

Nepal, one of the world's poorest countries, wants the refugees to leave. Bhutan, calling them agitators who want to overthrow the monarchy, doesn't want them back.

So for now the refugees are stuck in eight isolated UN-run camps amid mustard fields and mango groves.

A trip by road from the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu, takes three days. The area's small airstrip is flooded for four months of the year.

Snakes slither across the roads. UN workers are under orders to use mosquito nets because the abundant pests spread malaria and encephalitis.

"It is terrible living here," said Arun Sala-Ngarm, the chief representative of the

UN refugee agency, who once found a cobra in his office.

The marchers hope to make Bhutan reconsider their exile. But they aren't likely to get far. Bhutan has asked India to stop them at the border, and India, which has close defence ties with Thimphu, will probably agree.

The march nonetheless will draw attention to the plight of the refugees, which six rounds of talks between Bhutan and Nepal have failed to resolve.

The Drukpas are Buddhists who came from Tibet hundreds of years ago to what they call Druk-Yul — "Land of the Thunder Dragon." They see the Nepalese — recent arrivals in comparison — as a threat to their domination of the country.

In 1988, Bhutan began a

"one nation, one people" campaign decreeing that anyone who could not trace residency back to 1958 was no longer a citizen.

All citizens were required to learn the Bhutanese language, Dzongkha, and were told about the benefits of following Buddhism.

Men were ordered to wear a Kho, a wraparound tunic, while women were to wear a Kira, an ankle-length robe with a jacket. The heavy woolen mountain clothes are unsuitable Nepalese live.

The government also tried to promote marriages between Bhutanese and Nepalese, offering 285 dollars to such couples willing to tie the knot.

The ethnic Nepalese, feeling that their culture was being destroyed, began an

China wants to coordinate ties with Libya

TRIPOLI, Jan 13: Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen said Friday Beijing wanted to coordinate its ties with Libya to "counter imperialist hegemony" in international organisations the Libyan news agency Jana reported, says AFP.

Qian, who has been visiting Libya since Thursday, said during talks with his Libyan counterpart, Omar Mustafa al-Muntasir, that his visit aimed to strengthen links between the two countries in order to counter the "imperialist hegemony" in international organisation and defend human rights and freedom.