

International

Cong hopes to get 'comfortable majority' in polls

Rao faces serious threat ahead of crucial general elections

NEW DELHI, Jan 20: Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao faces a serious threat ahead of crucial general elections...

Human resource Development Minister Madhavrao Scindia, one of the handful of Congress leaders with a reputation for honesty...

legedly paid more than 20 million dollars to 115 politicians and bureaucrats between 1988 and 1991 in return for favours...

something that has led to further divisions," said a Congress source. "The PM may benefit from this exercise but not the party."

BRIEFLY



An unidentified passenger (L) of the Turkish Black Sea ferry 'Avrasya' laughs on Friday as 'Muhammed' (R), one of the leaders of the pro-Chechen commando that seized January 16 the ship carrying some 200 passengers and crew in the harbor of Trabzon, cuddles her child shortly before the hostage-takers surrendered to Turkish police and handed over their hostages. — AFP/UNB photo

Burundi troops kill 20 Rwandans:

Burundi government troops killed about 20 Rwandan Hutus and wounded scores in an attack on a refugee camp in northeast Burundi, witnesses said yesterday.

Filipino family feud claims 15:

Fifteen people have died in a clash between two feuding Muslim families in Lanao Del Sur in the southern Philippines, security officials said yesterday.

6 killed during Lahore kite-flying:

Six people were killed and a hundred injured, most from electrocution or stray bullets, during an annual kite-flying festival in Lahore, witnesses and hospital sources said yesterday.

Chernomyrdin may visit US soon:

Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin is expected in Washington January 29-30 for talks with Vice President Al Gore on the political situation in Russia.

China executes 14 criminals:

China executed 14 criminals on Friday in the southern city of Shenzhen, the semi-official China news service reported, Reuter reports from Hong Kong.

French air force plane crashes:

A French Air Force Mirage 2000-N nuclear bomber flew a flock of birds and crashed as it was landing on Friday at its base in southern France, but no nuclear weapons were aboard, the air force said.

Ex-Singapore PM hospitalised:

Singapore's elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew has been hospitalized after complaining of chest pains and initial tests indicate a narrowing of his coronary arteries.

Qatar's deposed ruler in Oman:

Qatar's deposed ruler arrived in Oman on Friday on the latest stage of a tour of other Arab nations to seek support for his plans to regain power.

Maharashtra road mishap claims 14:

At least 14 people were killed and seven injured near Pune in the western Indian state of Maharashtra when a four-wheel-drive vehicle in which they were riding collided with a bus.

Hillary's gift to Jayalalitha

CHICAGO, Jan 20: America's First Lady Hillary Clinton has presented an autographed copy of her just published book to the World Federation of Tamil Youth for handing over to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha in recognition of her innovative child welfare programmes.

Muslims urged to give up claims on Hindu religious places at Ayodhya

ALLAHABAD, Jan 20: The Kendriya Marg Darshak Mandal has urged the Muslim leaders to give up their claims on Hindu religious places at Ayodhya and Mathura, reports PTI.

Why Lisa Marie, Jackson getting divorce?

LOS ANGELES, Jan 20: OK, so what really happened between Lisa Marie and Michael Jackson? Don't count on finding out.

Indian newsmen threaten direct action, strike

NEW DELHI, Jan 20: Seven journalists unions yesterday threatened to launch a direct action and resort to a strike if the government does not announce 50 per cent interim relief for newspaper and news agency employees by the end of this month.



PLO leader Yasser Arafat puts the first stone for the first international airport in Gaza City on Friday. About one million Palestinians will go to the polls on Saturday, for the first time in their history to elect a president and 88 members for the Palestinian self-rule council. — AFP/UNB photo

Lankan troops kill 15 Tigers, destroy 25 LTTE camps

COLOMBO, Jan 20: Sri Lankan troops killed at least 15 Tamil guerrillas and destroyed some 25 rebels camps in their latest offensive in the eastern part of the island, the Defence Ministry and military sources said today, reports Reuter.

Batticaloa districts, about 50 miles (80 km) northwest of Batticaloa Town. Troops in operation Rivikirana captured several large camps and many smaller satellite camps without encountering much resistance from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the defence sources said.

The army captured Jaffna town, centre of a Tamil homeland in the north and east for which the rebels are fighting, after a seven-week offensive.

The guerrillas withdrew from camps as troops advanced and began firing mortars from far away, one source said.

The rebels have since carried out a series of attacks on the military in the east while cutting power supplies and disrupting transport.

The military has launched limited operations in other parts of the east aimed at cutting off the rebels' access to towns and destroying their hideouts, they added.

The operational headquarters of the Ministry of Defence said in a statement ground troops estimated that more than 15 rebels were killed and some 20 wounded in the operation.

Its aim is to smash LTTE hideouts that have sprung up in the east since the rebels regrouped in the area after the fall of their northern stronghold to the army last month.

The government says more than 50,000 people have died in the 12-year-separatist war.

Twelve soldiers received minor injuries, the statement said.

Military sources said the operation began on the border of the Polonnaruwa and Batticaloa districts, about 50 miles (80 km) northwest of Batticaloa town.

AFP adds, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga Friday appealed to doctors to treat thousands of Tamil civilians displaced by fighting between government forces and Tamil Tiger guerrillas.



US President Bill Clinton (R) meets with Japanese Foreign Minister Yukihiko Ikeda in the Oval Office in the White House on Friday. Ikeda and Clinton discussed the upcoming US-Japan summit in Tokyo and security issues. Earlier in the day Ikeda met with US national security advisor Anthony Lake then US Secretary of State Warren Christopher. — AFP/UNB photo

Senate negotiators okay new \$ 265b defence bill

WASHINGTON, Jan 20: House Senate negotiators approved a new \$265 billion dollar defence bill on Friday, stripping out a missile defence speedup and other provisions that caused President Bill Clinton to veto the original bill, reports Reuter.

proval of the stricken items, which were part of their "contract with America" campaign pledge, as separate bills. The 265 billion dollar authorisation for US defence programmes next year is 7 billion dollar more than Clinton asked, carrying out a Republican pledge to restore higher US defence spending.

The negotiators said Congress will likely approve the bill next week and they thought Defence Secretary William Perry would recommend that Clinton sign it into law. But they said they had no White House assurances that he would do so.

Clinton said the missile defence speedup was not needed because US intelligence agencies foresee no missile attack threat for at least a decade. His policy is to continue research but not to begin building such a defence unless a specific threat begins to emerge.

The negotiators stripped or revised a provisions that would have ordered construction of a defence against limited missile attacks starting in 2003 and restricted Clinton's power to commit US troops to international peacekeeping operations.

He also said the US defence would undermine the 1972 US-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty

But they did not change other provisions to which Clinton objected that would prohibit most abortions in military hospitals and require dismissal of any troops who have the HIV virus, which causes AIDS. Republicans said they would try to win ap-

proval of the stricken items, which were part of their "contract with America" campaign pledge, as separate bills. The 265 billion dollar authorisation for US defence programmes next year is 7 billion dollar more than Clinton asked, carrying out a Republican pledge to restore higher US defence spending.

Off the Record

Talking cabs

NEW YORK: While a number of New York City taxi drivers have trouble with English, by the end of the year their cabs might speak it fluently, reports AP.

In a pilot programme that could be expanded to the entire fleet, three taxis began giving an automated warning on Thursday: "Please remember to take your property, and don't forget to ask for a receipt."

In a city where people take more than half a million taxis rides a day, forgotten gloves, shopping bags and umbrellas are no small matter. In December alone, the taxi commission received 5,457 reports of items left in yellow cabs.

The voice devices cost 40 dirrs to 70 dirrs and taxi owners would pay for them.

Party of dreams

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil: They're calling it the party of dreams, reports AP.

Gilberto Scarpa, a multi-billionaire Brazilian businessman, is throwing a 2 million dollar bash on Saturday at his mansion in the Uruguayan city of Punta del Este to celebrate his 20th wedding anniversary.

The guest list is 850 names long and includes Pele, Ivana Trump, actress Elsa Martinelli and Argentine President Carlos Menem, the Rio daily Journal do Brasil reported on Thursday.

Scarpa hired 50 photographers, 100 security agents and as many waiters for the party at his "Pinduca Chalet" in Punta del Este, a coastal city known for its posh casinos and fancy restaurants.

The daily said a private plane with the first 70 guests left Sao Paulo on Thursday for the flight to Uruguay. Scarpa and his wife, Henriqueta, were to greet their guests at the airport.

'Too light' sentence for worst cruelty

WELLINGTON: A farmer who allowed more than 1,700 animals to die after inadvertently giving them a chemical overdose was sentenced of Friday to 200 hours of community service work, reports AP.

Agriculture Ministry officials described the case as one of the worst cruelty cases its animal welfare service had investigated. The farmer was charged with three counts of animal cruelty after more than 1,700 sheep and cattle died following a livestock drenching programme on his farm at Turangi on the central North Island.

Drenching uses pest control chemicals to kill everything from ticks and fleas to intestinal worms. Agriculture ministry prosecutor Ross McVicar said the farmer had failed to monitor the drenching programme, and failed to call in a veterinarian when stock deteriorated and died in excessive numbers from drench overdose.

The farmer will also have to US dirrs 6,325 in costs to the Agriculture Ministry. New Zealand animal welfare group the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals said the court sentence was "too light."

Director Bob Kerridge said the sentence meant the farmer would serve just seven minutes for each animal that had died on his farm.

Japan for an end to Chechen crisis

Yeltsin defends military action to crush Chechens

NEAR PREVOMAIKOYE, Russia, Jan 20: President Boris Yeltsin on Friday brushed off public criticism and defended a bloody military operation to crush Chechen rebels holding dozens of hostages in southern Russian village, reports Reuter.

As Yeltsin justified the use of Russian military might, Turkish authorities persuaded a group of pro-Chechen gunmen to release around 200 passengers, most of them Russians, and the crew of a ferry they had seized — without a single shot being fired.

Yeltsin shrugged off media criticism that the huge Russian force used to pound guerrillas in the village of Prevomaikiye had been unnecessary. "The operation was planned and carried out cor-

rectly," he told a Kremlin news conference after a Commonwealth of Independent States summit.

Russia finished the body count after the assault on Prevomaikiye ended a 10-day rebel hostage saga, but nearly half the "Lone Wolf" Chechen guerrillas appeared to have escaped.

Gunman who hijacked a ferry in the Black Sea port of Trabzon in support of Chechen rebels surrendered on Friday to Turkish authorities, the ship's captain said. He said there were about seven or eight hijackers, mainly ethnic Turks.

The Hijackers, protesting at Russia's assault, won the support of around 1,000 Turks who marched through Istanbul chanting "long live our Chechen rebellion."

High immigration in Israel helps fuel economic growth

JERUSALEM, Jan 20: Many developed nations worry that high immigration contributes to unemployment, but in Israel the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union has helped fuel exceptional economic growth and slashed joblessness in half, officials say, reports AFP.

reached seven per cent in real terms in 1995, when 77,000 immigrants moved to the country, according to the government's central statistics office.

Unemployment, meanwhile, dropped by half to 5.9 per cent of the working population last year.

"Immigration has had an almost miraculous impact because it gives us an extraordinary capital in human talent," Yair Taaban, the Minister for Immigrant Absorption, told AFP.

He said recent immigrants included 58,000 engineers, 10,000 scientists and 14,000 doctors.

Although some of these professionals had to accept employment in other fields due to a lack of demand for their expertise, they nevertheless represent a human resource with a level of formal education far above the Israeli average.

The cost of this specialised workforce is far lower than in the developed countries and this has given us a boost in our export industries, especially in high-technology sectors," said Tsipi Galiam of the finance ministry's research department.

She expressed concern that even four months after the Rajkumar Mainsana Singh Wage Board, sent their recommendations to the Union Labour Ministry is still dithering over the enhancement and notification.

"We strongly warn the government that it is forcing industrial unrest in the newspaper establishments through its inaction," the statement said.

She said the ex-Soviet immigrants also arrived at just the right time: as the

peace process and the easing of the Arab boycott against Israel coincided with the expansion of export markets, notably in Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe.

The mass arrival of immigrants has been felt in virtually every sector of the economy.

Last year, new housing starts hit a record 40,000 units, nearly half of them reserved for immigrants, while household consumption has also soared.

Both phenomena contributed to creating jobs for Israelis and the new immigrants alike. Unemployment among recent arrivals fell

from 38 per cent in 1990 to less than 10 per cent last year, according to government statistics.

The flip-side of the coin is that these new workers are also buying imported goods, from cars to appliances, sending Israel's trade deficit to a record 10.2 billion dollars last year.

In addition, explains David Brodet, general director at the Finance Ministry, the task of helping immigrants settle costs the state about 3.5 billion dollars per year.

The borrowing pushed Israel's foreign debt up from 16 billion dollars to 18 billion dollars, or about 25 per cent of gross national product, a figure Galiam insists "remains within the realm of the reasonable."

The two men, meeting for the first time, agreed that the recent resignations of three influential reformers from President Boris Yeltsin's cabinet marked a critical time for Russian reform.

state department spokesman Nicholas Burns said.

Washington, Jan 20: Secretary of State Warren Christopher and new Japanese Foreign Minister Yukihiko Ikeda had a long conversation Friday on the uncertain future of reforms in Russia, the state department said, reports AFP.