

Emissary of junta makes contact with Suu Kyi

BANGKOK, Dec 21: An emissary of the Myanmar military government has been in contact with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, but both sides denied today that this was the start of a dialogue between them.

The emissary told Reuter from Yangon that a channel of information flow had been opened between the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) Party.

However, he added: "It is premature to call it the start of a dialogue. In this way it is direct and we don't have to rely on hearsay."

Deputy Secretary-General of the NLD U Tin Oo, confirmed that a government official had visited Suu Kyi this week but said the meeting was to clarify the government request to her not to leave home without permission.

Ghali calls for end to fighting in Somalia

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 21: The UN Security Council and the UN chief on Friday called for an immediate and to factional fighting in Somalia which has killed more than 100 people in a week, reports AFP.

The calls were made in separate statements issued by the 15-member council and outgoing UN Secretary-General Boutros Ghali.

The Security Council, which expressed particular concern about the plight of the civilian population, in a former statement called on all Somali factions to work towards a political settlement "and to start a process of national reconciliation" aimed at establishing a broad-based government.

Boutros Ghali, who said he was following developments with "deep concern," urged the Somali leaders to show "political wisdom and patriotism" to prevent regional efforts towards peace being undermined.

Fighting has gripped the Somali capital Mogadishu in recent days in a flare-up of clashes between militiamen of Somali clan warlords.

There is a linkage between the SLORC and Aung San Suu Kyi. A liaison officer came to explain to her about her confinement to the house, he said. It is not opening of a channel for dialogue."

Suu Kyi, who was released after six years of house arrest in July 1995, has sought dialogue with the SLORC to bring about more freedom and democracy in Myanmar.

But the SLORC has refused to hold a dialogue with Suu Kyi and her NLD, it had demanded that talks be held through the government appointed national convention which is drawing up a new national constitution.

Suu Kyi and her NLD walked out of the convention in November 1995.

Political sources in Yangon said they had heard rumours that the SLORC and NLD had held talks through a mediator recently.

Internet slammed as 'poison' in Iran

TEHRAN, Dec 21: An Iranian Ayatollah on Friday slammed the internet as a "poison" which could harm moral values in the Islamic republic, saying access should be restricted to scientists, reports AFP.

Unfortunately, some officials have also been swept away by the phenomenon and do not realise that the internet is poisoning the people," Ayatollah Ahmad Janati said at the weekly Muslim prayers in Tehran.

"Use of the internet should be limited to scientists and researchers," said Janati, leader of the ultra-conservative wing of the Shi'ite Muslim clergy in Iran.

"We are not against the scientific use of the internet but we must be careful because it is even more dangerous than poison, harming the opinions and morals" of the Iranian people, he said.

Janati criticised defender of the internet, saying it carries "pornographic songs and films."

— AFP/UNB photo

Peruvian rebels free 38 more as envoys seek to end standoff

LIMA, Peru, Dec 21: Leftist rebels freed 38 more hostages late Friday, including three ambassadors, as diplomats worked feverishly to end a three-day standoff and win the release of more than 300 dignitaries still held captive, reports AP.

It was the largest group of hostages freed by the Tupac Amaru rebels since the early hours of the crisis Tuesday night, when two dozen rebels stormed the embassy residence during a birthday party.

Another of the released hostages, 20-year-old business school student Jerico Camino, warned the government against raiding the embassy residence, saying "It would be a bloodbath."

There would be casualties

outside as well as in. And I think much more inside," he said outside a fire station.

Camino said there had been a lack of food, water and living space, but that after the first days, captives were allowed to watch TV and are now avidly following the live, round-the-clock coverage of their own plight.

In addition, a statement faxed to The Associated Press on Friday, apparently by the Tupac Amaru rebel group, threatened attacks on "other key targets in the country" if Peru tries to forcibly take the mission.

A local television station, meanwhile, broadcast excerpts late Friday night from what it said was a videotape made by

the rebels showing several armed men preparing for the raid.

The three-minute tape showed men wearing the dark, military-style shirts and wool caps over their faces that Tupac Amaru rebels often wear. They had scarves over their faces, emblazoned with images of crossed rifles and the letters MRTA — the Spanish-language initials of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement.

The videotape shown on Channel 5 also showed what purported to be a mock-up of the Japanese ambassador's residence — and exterior wall and interior buildings.

Luis Fernandez, a reporter for the station, said he believed the tape to be accurate but would not say how the station obtained it. Its accuracy could not be confirmed.

The release of the 38 hostages at about 8 p.m. Friday left about 340 male hostages from assorted countries still inside the residence. All female hostages had been freed by Wednesday.

Among those let go Friday were the ambassadors of Brazil, Egypt and South Korea — 11 ambassadors remained captive.

Earlier reports from Quito add: The leader of a group of former Ecuadorean rebels proposed Friday joining with ex-guerrillas from Colombia to help mediate the hostage stand-off in Peru.

Pedro Moncada, ex-leader of the defunct Alfarro Vive group, said former Ecuadorean guerrillas should form a commission with ex-rebels from Colombia's M 19 Movement to help resolve the Peruvian crisis.

Alfarro Vive fought to overthrow Ecuador's democratically elected government in the 1990s.

The group disbanded in 1989 when its members put down their arms. They tried unsuccessfully to form a legitimate political party.

Moncada's offer came day after Ecuadorian President Abdala Bucaram backed off an offer made by Foreign Minister Leoro



Brazil's ambassador to Peru, Luiz Cutinho Perez (3rd R), speaks through a megaphone after he and 37 others, including the ambassador from South Korea were released from the home of the Japanese Ambassador by terrorists of the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA) Friday in Lima. The terrorists seized the residence Wednesday and are demanding the release of some 400 of their comrades from Peruvian jails in exchange for the release of some 330 remaining hostages.

— AFP/UNB photo

Talks fail to make any headway: Arafat PA urges US to freeze loan guarantees to Israel

GAZA, Dec 21: Palestinian officials demanded on Friday that the United States freeze its loan guarantees to Israel in response to the Jewish state's settlement policy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, reports Reuter.

We are undertaking a cam-

paign to confront the settle-

ment policy because this is the

main danger which threatens us," said Palestinian Planning Minister Nabil Shaath after the weekly cabinet meeting in Gaza.

We are demanding the

American administration stop

its loan guarantees to Israel,"

Shaath said, adding: "We will

move in all directions to con-

front Israel's settlement policy."

Israel raised Palestinian ire with a decision last week to grant financial benefits to Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The Israeli action followed the killing of a settler mother and her son by Arab gunmen.

A White House spokesman said Washington found the latest policy on settlements a complicating factor in peace efforts which have been stuck on the long-overdue handing over of 80 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, reports Reuter.

Former president George Bush held up 10 billion in US loan guarantees over the settlement issue, awarding them only after Yitzhak Rabin ousted Shamir and Likud in 1993 and froze new settlement building.

AFP adds, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat said on Friday that negotiations on Israel's long-delayed withdrawal from the West Bank town of Hebron had failed to make any substantial progress.

Israel's relations with Washington reached a 35-year low in the early 1990s over a settle-



US President Bill Clinton (R) and his wife Hillary (L) read Clement C. Moore's 'Twas the night before Christmas as seven-year-old Daniel Raycrow (C) listens at the White House in Washington Friday. Clinton read to a group of children invited to the White House from Washington area schools.

— AFP/UNB photo

China moves to set up new legislature for HK defying British, US protests

SHENZHEN, China, Dec 21: Defying British and US protests, China on Saturday began setting up a new legislature that will abort and replace Hong Kong's elected assembly when British rule ends on July 1, reports AP.

In so doing, China was court-

ing fresh accusations that it is

reneging on its promises to pre-

serve Hong Kong's democratic

rights. The big questions now

looming are how long the so-

called provisional legislature

will last, and when Hong Kong

will be allowed to elect its suc-

cessor.

Tung Chee-hwa, the shipping

tycoon who will head the Hong

Kong government from July 1,

has promised it will last exactly

one year and that a new one will

be elected, partially by direct

balloting, "as soon as possible,

probably during the first half of 1998."

But Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, address-

ing the 400-member Selection Committee that chose the new legislature, said only that it "will not have a long term," and did not mention a future election.

China says the legislature must go because it was elected under reformed rules to which it never agreed. Britain says democratic development was part of the 1984 deal under which it agreed to end 156 years of colonial rule and return Hong Kong to China.

On Friday, British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind vowed to mobilise world protest, and the US State Department called the provisional legislature "unjustified and unnecessary."

Gian dismissed Rifkind's complaint as "a hackneyed tune" and said "the British lack the courage to face reality."

Hong Kong radio said 16 people gathered at the border and released helium balloons

carrying a protest banner toward the nearby Chinese city of Shenzhen.

Shenzhen City Hall is where the Selection Committee was electing legislators to replace the outgoing 60-member body that was elected in September 1995, some by direct ballot, some indirectly.

Of the 130 candidates, 34 are members of the outgoing legislature and 26 are failed candidates from last year's election.

The Democrats, Hong Kong's largest party, is boycotting the new legislature.

The Selection Committee was set up by a China-appointed panel working in secret from nominations sent in by the Hong Kong public. It is dominated by Hong Kong business and professional people.

Gian claimed the candidates were "widely representative." But although opinion polls show the idea of a provisional legislature is beginning to win a

measure of acceptance in Hong Kong, analysts say it will have a hard time gaining credibility.

By holding the selection in Shenzhen, the Chinese managed to insulate themselves from Hong Kong's sometimes rowdy street politics, Qian said. It was supposed to have taken place in Hong Kong, but Britain's non-cooperative attitude made that impossible.

With Britain's protests having gone unheeded and the new body now looking a certainty, attention is focusing on future tests of China's ability to tolerate democracy in Hong Kong.

Democratic Party leader Martin Lee said the new legislature would be Tung's proving ground as chief executive of post-handover Hong Kong.

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