

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 the start of a dialogue between them.

The emissary told Reuters 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.

"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.

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 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.

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."

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.

As the tired and hungry hostages were driven in vehicles through police lines, hostess Javier Diaz Canseco, a leftist Congresswoman, read a statement that he said was on behalf of fellow hostages.

"The main message is that there must be a dialogue. We're badly off," he shouted in frustration before being driven off. "We're upset and we're tense."

The statement urged the government to restore electricity, water and telephone service to the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima, where two dozen rebels were holding the remaining hostages, demanding that some 300 of their members be released from Peruvian prisons.

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 blood-bath."

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 report from Quito adds The leader of a group of former Ecuadorian rebels proposed Friday joining with guerrillas from Colombia to help mediate the hostage standoff in Peru.

Pedro Moncada, ex-leader of the defunct Alfaro Vive group, said former Ecuadorian guerrillas should form a commission with ex-rebels from Colombia's M 19 Movement to help resolve the Peruvian crisis. Alfaro Vive fought to overthrow Ecuador's democratically elected government in the 1980s.

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 Ecuador 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 Reuters.

"We are undertaking a campaign to confront the settlement 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 confront 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 handover of 80 per cent of the West Bank town of Hebron to Palestinian rule.

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

ment boom spearheaded by right-wing Likud Party Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and his Housing Minister Ariel Sharon.

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.



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

UNSC slams Croatia for harassment of Serbs

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 21: The Security Council on Friday criticised Croatia for harassment, looting and attacks against its Serb population by military and police officials, reports Reuters.

In a statement approved by all members and read at a formal meeting, the council called on Croatia to improve security and establish a functioning court system in the former Serb held areas captured by Zagreb in the summer of 1995.

It deplored the continued failure by the government to safeguard property rights of Serbs trying to come back to their homes and said the government should "stop all forms of discrimination" against Croatian Serbs in social benefits and reconstruction assistance.

"Although the security situation has improved slightly, the Security Council however, expresses its concern at continued acts of harassment, looting and physical attacks against

Croatian Serbs and in particular, involvement by Croatian uniformed military and police officials in a number of those incidents, the statement said.

UP to 200,000 Serbs fled when Zagreb's troops recaptured the Serb-dominated Krajina region in two swift offensives in 1995. Only a few Serbs remained in the area and about 12,000 have been allowed to return.

The council said that a new amnesty law for Croatian Serbs not wanted for war crimes was not being implemented fairly in either Croatia or in eastern Slavonia, a Croatian province currently under UN control.

It also called on Croatia to cooperate fully with the UN war tribunal in The Hague.

The Security Council rights Croatia's human rights situation about every three months a process the Zagreb government says singles it out and touches on tasks normally given to the General Assembly.

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 abolish and replace Hong Kong's elected assembly when British rule ends on July 1, reports AP.

In so doing, China was courted fresh accusations that it is reneging on its promises to preserve Hong Kong's democratic rights. The big questions now loomed are how long the so-called provisional legislature will last, and when Hong Kong will be allowed to elect its successor.

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, addressing

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."

Qian 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.

Qian 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.

Off the Record



Italian fashion designer Valentino (R) arrive late on Friday at a movie theatre downtown Rome to take part in the Italian premiere of the film 'Evita'. US singer and actress Madonna stars in the film as Evita Peron. — AFP/UNB photo

Nun looking thief!

NEW YORK: She looked like a nun, but police say she acted like a thief, reports AP.

Margaret Bridges, 65, was arrested Wednesday night for allegedly helping two families of thieves rip off clothes and other goods from Macy's department store and a toy store.

Bridges is known for donning a black nun's habit and panhandling across the street from Macy's, police said. She would sit on a folding chair, counting beads on her rosary along with the spare change she begged from passing shoppers.

The way she was dressed and everything she seemed harmless, said Capt Vito Spano of the Midtown south Detective Squad.

But store security recently suspected a sinister side to the sister telling police that shoplifters would leave bags of stolen clothes, housewares and cosmetics with her for safekeeping while returning to the store for second helpings. In exchange, she would keep something for herself.

On Wednesday, plainclothes cops watched as Michael McLeod, 40, his wife, Donna, 41, and their 15-year-old daughter allegedly lifted merchandise from Macy's and left it with Bridges. A nine-month-old pregnant Ella James, 40 and her daughter Octavia Burgess, 16, also deposited a haul from a nearby Toys R Us, police said.

The shoplifting suspects were arrested on charges of possessing stolen property, larceny, the adults were also charged with endangering the welfare of a child.

A stoic Bridges was collared for possessing stolen property. She had no proof of a religious affiliation.

"She just kept saying, 'I'm a missionary,'" Spano said.

Amir has a radio, but his request for a computer has been denied. He has access to the prison's library, but has asked only for religious books, said Iris Bieber, spokeswoman for the Prisons Authority.

Bieber denied reports that Amir was served catered meals. "Amir gets regular prison food," she said.

Lingerie thief caught at last

BANGKOK: Bangkok police have finally cracked the case of the disappearing underwear, arresting a 51-year-old cook who has been collecting other people's lingerie for two decades, the Bangkok Post said Saturday, reports AP.

Chuachor Nawamathiti was initially caught with 10 pieces of lingerie he took from a housing estate in suburban Bangkok, police said.

When they later searched his home, the police were taken aback on discovering a collection of more than 1,000 undergarments in eight cardboard boxes. The collection went back 20 years.

The post said Chuachor, who claimed to be merely fascinated with lingerie, was being questioned on theft charges.

Stalin played positive role in Russia's history!

MOSCOW: Nearly one-third of Moscow residents surveyed believe Josef Stalin played a positive role in Russia's history, according to a poll released Friday, reports AP.

But half of the 1,529 people interviewed face-to-face in Russia's capital said they did not like the Soviet dictator, who ruled from 1924 until his death in 1953, the VTSIOM public opinion center said.

People older than 55 were three times as likely to approve of Stalin than those under 25, it said.

Of the people polled, 31 per cent took a positive view of Stalin, 50 per cent a negative view and 19 per cent were undecided. The survey had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 per cent.

Older Russians with positive feelings toward Stalin point to the Soviet Union's industrial development and victory in World War II under his rule.

But millions of people died in Stalin's purges and prison camps, and in famines induced to force peasants onto collective farms.

valuable, too important to all of us to be put at risk," he added.

Major was speaking at the end of a week in which unemployment fell below two million for the first time in six years and the Paris based organisation for economic co-operation and development judged Britain's economic prospects to be the best in thirty years.

Unfortunately for Major, who must hold a general election by May there is scant evidence yet of the economic good times translating into increased support for his Conservative Party.

Polis consistently show Labour, which has been in opposition since 1979 with a lead of at least 20 percentage points.

Major blasted Labour for having opposed key privatisation changes, union reforms and public spending cuts, and said it "could no more preserve the success of the British economy today than they could have helped to create it in the first place."

Major appeals not to throw him out

LONDON, Dec 21: Prime Minister John Major appealed to Britons on Friday not to throw him out of office just because it was "time for a change" after 17 years of Conservative rule, reports Reuters.

Major who trails badly in the opinion polls, said victory for the main opposition Labour Party at the looming election could jeopardise the economic gains his government had overseen.

"Next year, Britain will go to polls, people will have their democratic opportunity to decide if they wish to do away with the government that has enabled British people to build their success or choose instead the policies of those who have opposed all the ingredients of Britain's success, the prime minister told businessmen in Birmingham, central England.

"I know what some might say: 'Isn't it time for a change? Well, as long as you have progress, why bother to change? Britain's success is too