

India stepping up its missile power ignoring US warning

NEW DELHI, Dec 30 Ignoring warnings from the United States, India is beefing up its missile capacity after rejecting global calls to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), reports Reuters.

India successfully tested its Trishul (Trident) surface-to-air missile Sunday and said it would soon test launch an enhanced version of its Agni (Fire) ballistic missile.

Indian defence analysts defended the decision to step up India's missile programme, despite concerns of a possible arms race with arch-rival Pakistan, saying New Delhi should already have a long-range missile capacity.

India should go ahead with the deployment of missiles of all ranges. A long-range missile is an absolute necessity," said Jasjit Singh, director of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA) think-tank.

"Our cities will be undefended without a long-range missile. Everybody is going ahead with their missile de-

velopment programmes and so should India," he said.

Singh said an Agni-type missile required three dozen tests before deployment.

"It will take 10 years for completion of these tests to end," he said.

"Are we waiting for the enemy to arrive next door and then jump into action?"

The Agni, designed to carry a one-tonne nuclear or conventional warhead, was first test-fired on May 22, 1989, and has been successfully tested three times since.

The Trishul is one of five guided missiles locally designed and developed as part of India's ambitious programme, launched in 1983 to build an arsenal of rockets and missiles, and has been dubbed by analysts as India's answer to the US-made Patriot.

Military experts here have welcomed the resumption of the Agni project, which was put on hold by the previous government under intense pressure from the United States. That

government was voted out in May.

Washington feared the Indian missile programme could trigger an arms race in the Sub-continent.

Pakistan has also voiced fears, saying the Indian missile development programme would lead to a race for weapons of mass destruction in South Asia.

The two countries, which have fought three wars since 1947 and are believed to be in possession of technology to make atomic bombs, have rejected the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

"We have a deadline of less than three years for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). By then we should have moved forward on the nuclear option," said Singh of the IDSA.

"And, unless we have a delivery system (like Agni), why talk of the nuclear option?"

Officials sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said though India has deployed

Prithvi (Earth) surface-to-surface missiles, Pakistan has an edge with M-11 missiles acquired from China.

"The threat from China is more serious as it has developed a family of missiles with various ranges," one government official said.

India suspects China is sharing nuclear technology with Pakistan in violation of international commitments. China is also suspected of selling nuclear ring magnets to Pakistan in 1994 and 1995.

Beijing has never acknowledged that the transaction took place.

India and China fought a brief border war in 1962, but relations between the two Asian giants have been on the mend in recent times.

Military experts, however, feel the missile programme itself cannot provide security to India, whose million-strong army, one of the largest in the world, is facing a cash crunch and a serious shortage of manpower.



Israeli President Ezer Weizman (L) is greeted by Indian counterpart Shankar Dayal Sharma during a formal ceremonial arrival at Rashtrapati Bhavan (Presidential Palace) yesterday in New Delhi. Weizman, who begins a groundbreaking state visit to India, told reporters he expected an accord on the West Bank city of Hebron very soon. — AFP/UNB photo

Anti-Taliban jet bomb Qarabagh

QARABAGH, Afghanistan, Dec 30: Four bombs were dropped on Qarabagh, north of Kabul, today by an anti-Taliban jet as the frontlines came under heavy artillery fire, witnesses said, reports AFP.

A Sukhoi Su-22 bomber dropped two pairs of high-explosive bombs on the western side of the Bazaar, but no casualties were reported as the bazaar was mostly deserted.

The Taliban Islamic militia, which captured Qarabagh in a lightning attack on Friday, have dug-in a few kilometres (miles) north of the town where their frontlines also came under heavy artillery fire.

Several tanks and armoured fighting vehicles went forward to reinforce the Taliban lines, and more waited in reserve in Qarabagh Bazaar.

There was an infantry attack last night against us, but we gave up no ground," said Taliban returning from the frontlines.

They said there was a two-hour attack by the coalition forces of ex-government troops under commander Ahmed Shah Masood, now in alliance with the ethnic Uzbek forces of

northern warlord general Abdul Rashid Dostam and the minority Shiite religious sect under Karim Khalili.

The squad of Taliban fighters admitted they were ex-Mujahedeen from the Hezb-i-Islami faction of former prime minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who along with President Burhanuddin Rabbani, fled Kabul when it fell to the Taliban September 27.

6 killed in Lankan fighting

COLOMBO, Dec 30: Tamil Tiger rebels ambushed a military patrol in northern Sri Lanka killing three soldiers and two Tamil civilians, the military said Monday, reports AP.

In another incident on Sunday, guerillas fired at several Sinhalese farmers working in a rice paddy in the eastern Ampara district, killing one person, said a military official, who asked not to be named.

The soldiers were patrolling a jungle road near the northern city of Jaffna shortly after dusk on Sunday when the rebels detonated a mine.

India, Israel sign 4 accords

NEW DELHI, Dec 30: India and Israel signed four agreements to promote trade and cultural ties here today the first working day of President Ezer Weizman's groundbreaking visit, officials said, reports AFP.

The pacts, signed by Israeli ambassador to India Yehoyada Haim and Indian officials included technical cooperation and the exchange of experts in agriculture, the main stay of India's farm-dominated economy they said.

The two sides also signed an agreement to set up a demonstration farm near New Delhi to showcase Israeli technology, and a cultural exchanges programme aiming to celebrate the creation of Israel as well as India's 50th year of independence next year.



Guatemalan President Alvaro Arzu (C) lights a peace torch with Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) commander Rolando Moran (2nd R) as a girl, victim of the war, looks on Sunday at the La Plaza de la Constitucion in front of the Presidential Palace in Guatemala City. The government and the URNG signed a historic peace accord ending 36 years of civil war. — AFP/UNB photo

Govt-rebel sign peace accord in Guatemala

GUATEMALA CITY, Dec 30: The government and leftist rebels signed a historic peace agreement on Sunday ending 36 years of civil war in Guatemala, reports AFP.

The pact was signed at 5:41 pm (23:41 GMT) at the National Palace by president Alvaro Arzu and leaders of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG).

The treaty ends the region's longest conflict in which an estimated 150,000 people died and 50,000 disappeared.

The government and the URNG signed a ceasefire in Oslo December 4 and another agreement on December 7 in Stockholm on constitutional reforms.

AP adds: Outgoing UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, a witness to the signing of the Guatemala peace accord, described it as one of the most satisfying acts of his term.

"Today, as I leave office, I am gratified to witness the signing of this agreement," Boutros-Ghali told Guatemalan guerrilla and government representatives and some 1,200 foreign dignitaries on Sunday.

"For the first time, there is peace throughout the region, with democratically elected presidents in each country," he said.

Boutros-Ghali's presence at the formal signing ceremony was a reminder of the crucial role the United Nations has played in drawing Central America's last and longest war to a close.

"I want to show that the UN is a universal organisation lending its attention to the five continents of the world," Boutros-Ghali told reporters Saturday before leaving United Nations headquarters in New York.

Guatemalans remembered the tens of thousands who died in their country's civil war, determined that past horrors are not forgotten amid celebrations for a final peace accord being signed Sunday.

Meanwhile, joyous Guatemalans anxious to put the 36-year conflict behind them crowded the main plaza outside the National Palace, where the government and guerrilla rebels were to gather for the signing ceremony at 5 pm local time (23:00 GMT).

Off the Record

Floating prison

LONDON: The British government said on Sunday it planned to use a floating prison ship to house hundreds of convicts as a means of easing overcrowding in conventional jails, reports Reuters.

Prisons Minister Anne Widdicombe rejected criticism from prison reformers that use of the jail ship resolution, being brought to Britain from its mooring on New York's Hudson River, was a throwback to the prison hulks of the Victorian Times.

"I have seen some rather stupid comparisons in the press today with the hulks," Widdicombe said in an interview with Independent television news.

"It's nothing like that at all. It's modern, it has a gymnasium, it has exercise in the fresh air. It has all the things that we would expect an ordinary prison to have."

The resolution, to be moored off the south coast port of Portland, is expected to take up to 500 prisoners from next month to reduce pressure on British jails, which house an expanding population of about 59,000.

The rat-infested prison hulks described in Charles Dickens' novel "Great Expectations" were used to house convicts awaiting transportation to Australia. Conditions were cramped and insanitary, leading to the deaths of many inmates.

Hair eating doll

ROCK HILL, South Carolina: When the day-care centre called and told Gail Spears that a Cabbage Patch doll had taken a bite out of her daughter's hair, she almost didn't believe it, reports AP.

"I thought, This is so silly. A doll attached to her head?"

But sure enough, on the day after Christmas, a doctor had to cut 7-year-old Hanna Spears' locks to free her from the Cabbage Patch Snack Time Kid, adding her to a growing list of little girls snared by the doll which is supposed to "eat" plastic french fries and other fake food.

"It looked really bad. She was screaming and trying to hold the doll away from her, and the jaws just kept going and going," said Mrs. Spears, adding that her daughter was left with a raised welt on her scalp.

At least six hair-eating episodes have been reported since Christmas, three of which occurred in South Carolina. The dolls have no on-off switch, and parents reported cutting hair, pulling batteries out or destroying the doll to make it stop its chewing motion.

SC orders closure of 292 factories near Taj Mahal

NEW DELHI, Dec 30: India's Supreme Court today ordered around 300 factories near the Taj Mahal to close within four months to save the Medieval monument from decay, reports AFP.

Interim Pak PM urges people to support Imran's campaign

ISLAMABAD, Dec 30: Interim Pakistan Prime Minister Malik Meraj Khalid has called on people to support the political campaign of cricket hero Imran Khan saying he was a "good man", reports AFP.

The nation needs sincere and competent government which will be possible if voters reject feudal lords in general elections scheduled for February 3, the premier said.

Endorsing Khan's drive to root out "VIP culture" and stem corruption, Khalid said "Imran is a good man."

He was "sincere" and would demonstrate a sportsman's spirit in politics, he said at a function Sunday in Lahore.

Khan's wife Jemima, daughter of British tycoon Sir James Goldsmith, who arrived from London the same day with the couple's new born baby, was also present.

Khalid replaced prime minister Benazir Bhutto after her dismissal on November 5 by President Farooq Ahmed Leghari, on accusations of corruption and mismanagement.

Khan formed his Movement for Justice (Tehreek-i-Insaf) Party a week after a bomb exploded on April 14 in a hospital he founded leaving four people dead.

The caretaker premier also announced the lifting of ban imposed by Benazir's government on people to support the state run television to collect donations for his hospital.

In his hour-long speech he lambasted politicians who started bickering over personal interests and ignored national issues.

He said he had advised Khan not to retaliate with abusive language when his opponents indulged in mudslinging. "But sometime it becomes too difficult for him even to remain calm," Khalid said.

Khan stressing that he entered politics to purge the country of "looters and plunderers" alleged that Benazir's spouse Asif Ali Zardari personally intervened to block donations of drugs and equipment from pharmaceutical companies and medical firms to his hospital.

Zardari, a former investment minister is in jail in connection with the murder of Benazir's estranged brother Murtaza in a police shootout in Karachi on September 20.

Govt, rebels soften stands on hostage crisis in Peru

LIMA, Peru, Dec 30: Rebels offered a morale-boosting favour to their 83 remaining hostages, and rigid positions of both the Tupac Amaru and the Peruvian government appeared to soften as the standoff neared its third week, reports AP.

Tupac Amaru guerrillas holding diplomats and businessmen in the home of the Japanese ambassador have stopped uttering their key demand that hundreds of fellow rebels be freed from Peruvian prisons, and they have not repeat their initial threat to execute hostages.

They release 20 hostages on Saturday, after President Alberto Fujimori sent a Cabinet minister to initiate direct government contact with the rebels. The move was a departure from Fujimori's stated policy of not negotiating with "terrorists."

Whether the negotiator, Education Minister Domingo Palermo, gave anything in return for the freedom of the 20 is not clear.

Guerillas initially seized some 500 hostages during a gala cocktail party on Dec 17. But in staged releases that began almost immediately the number has been reduced to 83, a figure that analysts say is much more manageable for the 20 or so rebel captors.

In a move Sunday sure to bolster the hostages, the Red Cross said that the rebels would permit hostages to send messages to their families on Monday, and that it would deliver the replies the following day.

The Dominican ambassador to Peru, one of those released Saturday, described his 12 days in captivity as stressful. "We lived moments of great tension inside. One never knows on what thread life hangs," Jose Ramon Diazhe said Sunday.

As time wears on, the guerrillas — who appear to be seeking a political role in their country through their act — will find it increasingly difficult to sully their image by harming the captives.

AFP adds: Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto has praised Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori for his efforts to bring the hostage crisis in Lima to a peaceful conclusion, a Foreign Ministry official said today.

In a letter handed over to Fujimori on Sunday through the Japanese Embassy in Peru, the premier said he "respects President Fujimori's efforts to resolve this incident in a peaceful manner," the official said, reading a summary of the letter's contents.



Twenty-four year old Katia Brisson is crowned Miss Haiti 1996 in the country's first-ever beauty pageant, on Sunday. Brisson, a medical student who studies in the Dominican Republic, won with her response to a question about domestic violence. — Reuters/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

4 die as boats collide in NZ: Four fishermen were killed and another was missing following a collision on Sunday night between their boat and a cargo vessel in Wellington Harbour's narrow entrance channel, police said yesterday, AFP reports from Wellington.

A sixth crewman on the fishing vessel was rescued after a flotilla of rescue boats and a helicopter sped to the scene.

Storm death toll now 163 in Malaysia: The death toll from a storm that swept northern Borneo last week has reached 163, police said Monday, AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Most of the victims were found in Keningau, a logging town 150 kilometres (95 miles) north of the Sabah state capital, Kota Kinabalu. Police Inspector Hussein Yusof told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. All bodies except two in Keningau had been claimed by relatives, a flood control official said in Kota Kinabalu.

Blast kills 9 miners in China: Nine miners were killed in an explosion in two coal pits at Yangchun in China's Guangdong province last Tuesday, delayed reports said here yesterday, PTI reports from Beijing.

The accident was caused by a spark from an electrical switch that triggered the explosion of gas in the coal pits, the China Daily newspaper said.

Armed robbers kill 3 in Russia: Armed robbers killed three people bringing salaries to employees of a Russian-South Korean joint venture and escaped with 350 million rubles (dls 63,000) in cash, police said Monday, AP reports from Vladivostok, Russia.

The bodies of the three victims — a driver, a woman cashier and another passenger — were found close to their abandoned car outside Vladivostok in the Russian Far East on Saturday, police officials told the ITAR-Tass News agency.



Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat (R) shakes hands yesterday with Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai before they began negotiations aimed at reaching an accord on the redeployment of the Israeli army from the West Bank city of Hebron. The two reportedly remained optimistic after the talks and spoke of a meeting between Arafat and Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu soon to wrap up a deal. — AFP/UNB photo

Sharp warning issued against non-Arab Iran, Israel, Turkey

8 Arab states slam Iran for missile deployment on disputed Gulf islands

CAIRO, Dec 30: Eight Arab nations on Sunday delivered sharp warnings to three non-Arab neighbours — Iran, Israel and Turkey, and pledged to defend each other in the face of aggression, reports AFP.

In statements at the end of a two-day ministerial meeting here, the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), together with Syria and Egypt, criticised Iran over its deployment of missiles on three disputed Gulf islands.

The eight nations, meeting under the Damascus Declaration, also warned Israel that its hardline policies risked escalating regional tensions and they called on Turkey to review its military cooperation with the Jewish state.

The statement expressed "strong concern about Iran's deployment of ground-to-ground missiles in the Arab Gulf, including the three occupied 'United Arab Emirates' islands" of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb.

Iran's action represents a "direct threat to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and their strategic sites," the statement said, calling on Tehran to "abstain from all measures likely to compromise security and stability in the Gulf region."

The eight, which include GCC states — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, drew up a commitment on Sunday to defend each other in case of aggression against any one of them, an Egyptian official said.

In the event of armed aggression against a member country by an Arab or non-Arab nation, member states commit to taking immediately any individual or collective measure to repel the aggression," according to the document.

Signed in 1991 after the Gulf War to facilitate economic and security cooperation between Arab members of the US-led coalition which drove Iraqi troops from Kuwait, the Damascus Declaration has never been implemented.

Just before the opening of the meeting on Saturday, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa called on Iran to stop "creating problems in the Gulf."

The Damascus Declaration nations affirmed the UAE's right to the sovereignty of the three islands and "reiterated their demand to the Iranian government to bring its occupation to an end."

They also called on Tehran to stop building installations on the islands and urged the use of peaceful means, such as the International Court of Justice, to resolve the dispute.

On the Middle East peace process, the eight nations said: "The installation of real cooperation between regional parties in the Middle East is linked to the Israeli retreat from occupied Arab territories."

Without mentioning the accord expected soon on an Israeli pullout from most of the West Bank town of Hebron, the statement said that if the government of Benjamin Netanyahu continued its hard line "it could reduce (the peace process) to nothing and risks bringing the region back to a spiral of tension."

While praising recent comments by US President Bill Clinton against Jewish settlement of Palestinian territories, the statement called on the United States to "guarantee that American financial aid (to Israel) is not used to relaunch the settlements which threaten the peace process."

The Damascus group also expressed its support for Syria and Lebanon in the face of Israeli threats and provocation aimed at confirming the occupation of the Golan Heights and South Lebanon, and called for the resumption of peace talks between the parties, which were suspended in February.

The eight also called on Ankara to "review its military and security accords with Israel in a manner that does not compromise the security of Arab states."

In February, Turkey and Israel endorsed a strategic cooperation pact in defiance of objections by several Arab states, and since then they have struck up accords on joint military manoeuvres and a deal for Israel to help finance a modernisation programme for Turkey's F-4 fighter aircraft.