

Violence mars ME peace prospects

JERUSALEM, Jan 9: Violence flared once again in the Middle East and negotiations faded as Israelis and Arabs accused one another of wrecking hope for peace, reports Reuter.

Israeli warplanes thundered over Lebanon on Wednesday, bombing suspected targets of Hezbollah guerrillas in quick retaliation for a Katyusha rocket strike at the Jewish state and attacks on its soldiers.

A Hezbollah spokesman denied the Islamic militants fired the Katyusha but the tit-for-tat war waged between the Jewish state and the guerrillas continued.

In Jerusalem, a US envoy struggled to salvage an Israeli-PLO deal on the West Bank town of Hebron amid Arab calls on Israel to respect old deadlines.

"There is a constant attempt by the other side to delay implementation of the agreement," said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a direct reference to his peace partner, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

"Apparently there is a decision on the other side not to

complete the negotiations," Netanyahu told reporters.

Jordan's King Hussein, Israel's closest Arab ally, raised the spectre of war after meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the southern resort town of Aswan.

"We feel extremely concerned if the situation doesn't evolve into peace, which is what we hope for," King Hussein told a joint news conference when asked if the new tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbours could lead to war.

Mubarak said if the Palestinians lost confidence in Israeli promises, it would "mess things up" and Syria would not rejoin peace talks with Israel.

PLO officials described the gaps in talks on a long-elusive accord that would extend Palestinian rule to most of Hebron as "very wide" and accused Netanyahu of trying to renege on Israeli commitments.

Both sides said the sticking point had less to do with Hebron than with three further transfers of West Bank areas to Palestinian control.

Panic gripped the locality when the poisonous gas en-

International

Ammonia gas leak in Lahore slum kills 20

LAHORE, Jan 9: Deadly ammonia gas leaked from a truck and overcame sleeping residents of a Lahore slum, killing at least 20 people and hospitalising hundreds more, officials said Thursday. reports AP.

The accident occurred shortly before midnight on Wednesday in the Mogul Pura neighbourhood on the northern edge of this city in eastern Punjab province.

The flatbed truck was carrying

more than 30 cylinders of ammonia. Police and hospital officials said 20 people were killed.

Authorities said it appeared the shoddily made cylinders were knocked together when truck hit several bumps in the road, causing the leak. The truck driver did not even know the leaks had occurred, officials said.

There are no regulations for the transport of hazardous materials in Pakistan.

Mogul Pura is a congested area that is home to the poorest railway workers. They live in homes made from cheap materials, including dried mud and corrugated iron.

The army was called in to evacuate nearly 1,000 people to

nearby schools where emergency workers set up beds. Police were investigating the incident.

A survivor, Arif Din, complained about the police who apparently took up to two hours to arrive on the scene after the accident.

Fire trucks roared to the scene and flooded the area in an attempt to dissipate the gas, the APP said.

Police and hospital officials said 20 people were killed.

The accident was especially deadly because most of the neighbourhood's residents were sleeping when the gas seeped through the neighbourhood, witnesses said.

"I woke up and there was this horrible smell ... I got up but I collapsed," said one resident who gave his name only as Hafeez. "It was horrible ... I felt like I couldn't breathe. The same thing happened to my wife."

Several of the dead were women and small children. Five members of one family died in their sleep.

Rahim said residents were expected to be able to return to their homes later Thursday.

Milosevic admits opposition won Nis council polls

BELGRADE, Jan 9: President Slobodan Milosevic has made his first significant concession after 52 days of street protests, admitting that the opposition won disputed municipal elections in Serbia's second city of Nis, reports Reuter.

But the opposition has vowed no let up in demonstrations and Belgrade students plan a blockade today to test the will of police barring the path of their daily protest marches.

"Suppose Milosevic takes from you 10,000 dollar and after 50 days of demonstrating he accepts finally to give you back dollar 6,000, would you be ready to accept this?" said Vuk Draskovic, one leader of the Zajedno (Together) opposition coalition.

Official news agency Tanjug said the government agreed that a Zajedno had won Nis after a Justice Ministry inquiry ordered by Milosevic last month.

"On the basis of documents inspected by the Justice Ministry, the Zajedno Political Organisation won 37 seats, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) 32 and the Serbian Radical Party one seat in Nis local council," Tanjug said.

Zajedno leaders vowed protests would continue and said they had won 41 council seats, not 37.

UK accepts permanent end to N-tests

LONDON, Jan 9: Britain will shortly announce that it has accepted a permanent end to testing for its nuclear weapons, according to a report Friday in the London newspaper The Guardian, says AP.

The paper quoted an unnamed source close to test-ban treaty negotiations in Geneva as saying it has agreed instead to use US techniques that use instruments to simulate test explosions in order to maintain the safety of its nuclear arsenal.

There was no immediate comment from Prime Minister John Major's government on the report.

The paper's diplomatic editor Ian Black quoted the source as saying that Britain will announce the move this month.

Black said it follows President Clinton's announcement last month backing a "true zero test ban" by the United States.

Up to present, Britain has reserved the right to conduct test explosions involving a low yield of fissile material.

Britain is one of the world's five declared nuclear powers. It has no test facilities of its own and used to test its missiles at the US site in the Nevada desert but followed a US moratorium on testing in 1992.

Black quoted the source as saying that a permanent end to testing would make it harder to develop new warheads.

He quoted the source as saying: "The further the scientists get from being able to test with all their instruments in the field or in the lab, the harder it becomes. They lose confidence and the spark goes out of it for them."

Madeleine Albright, who has served as US ambassador during President Bill Clinton's first term, referred to the US debt during her Senate confirmation hearings Wednesday, saying it irritated other nations.

She said the United States was "the world's richest, strongest and most respected nation. We're also the largest debtor to the United Nations and the international financial institutions."

Asked whether the debt payment would be made over two years, the official said: "a lot of ideas were being tossed around" and we "just have to wait and see what sticks."

The United States owes \$1.3 billion to the world body and is by far its largest debtor.

The United Nations, owed \$1.2 billion by member countries, is facing the worst financial crisis in its history.

Secretary of State-designate

Jemima Goldsmith (centre), wife of Pakistani cricketer-turned politician Imran Khan stands with a group of women during an election campaign in Lahore yesterday. Khan, who launched his Movement for Justice party last year, is contesting the forthcoming February 3 polls.

— AFP photo

US drafting plan to pay over \$1b debt to UN

WASHINGTON, Jan 9: The Clinton administration is drafting a plan to pay the United Nations more than 1 billion dollar the United States owes, but has not decided how long it will take, a State Department official says, reports AP.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the department, the Treasury and the White House were working to present a coordinated strategy that would be acceptable to Congress.

There's momentum with a new secretary-general who wants to reform the world body, a new administration, a new secretary of state who served at the UN," the official said Wednesday.

The official said a decision on what the United States was going to do should be made in the next six months, before the United Nations locks up its program for 1998 and 1999.

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— AFP photo

Fujimori unlikely to give in to rebels' demands

CHACLAUCAYO, Peru, Jan 9: In a whirlwind tour of dusty shantytowns that resembled an election campaign, Peru's president told hundreds of residents that he can do what leftist rebels holding 74 hostages can not — give them a better future, reports AP.

Mobutu will return to his villa in the south of France for consultations with doctors, his spokesman told Reuters. Since coming home three weeks ago, Mobutu effected a major reshuffle in the government and the army high command in preparation for an intended counter-attack on positions held by rebels who have seized a large tract of eastern Zaire.

Mobutu in France for treatment: Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko flies to France yesterday to consult doctors about his health amid the growing crisis in the Central African nation where rebels control a strip of territory in the east, Reuter reports from Kinshasa.

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Gummen kill 3 in S Africa: At least three people were shot dead and 15 wounded when two minibuses they were travelling in were ambushed by gunmen in South Africa's remote Tugela Valley area, police said Wednesday. AFP reports from Weenen.

Shaking hands with well-wishers as he made the rounds in his four-wheel-drive vehicle, Alberto Fujimori told Peruvians — and dozens of reporters in tow — that his government is helping its citizens escape poverty.

And he had something to say Wednesday to the Tupac Amaru guerrillas who have occupied the home of Japan's ambassador since Dec. 27: No negotiations.

"Negotiation means exchanging favours," Fujimori said, flatly rejecting rebel demands that he release about 300 jailed guerrillas.

"We are not going to allow the release of terrorists who

have killed, who have assassinated, who have committed crimes against the people and against the nation," Fujimori said. "There are no (Tupac Amaru) followers here. Here, everyone is for peace. Everyone is for development."

He chose Chacalacayo, an impoverished district of factories, half-built homes and unpaved streets 20 miles (30 kilometers) east of Lima, to emphasise the point.

Long a hotbed of political activism, the town nestled against the rocky foothills of the Andes has struggled with extreme poverty that helped spawn the 17-year Maoist Shining Path insurgency and smaller Tupac Amaru Movement.

For many years, this was an area where violence reigned," said Fujimori, whose administration declared victory over the Shining Path and Tupac Amaru in the mid-1990s after capturing their principal leaders.

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