

WB withdrawal agreement being drafted

Israel, PA on verge of accord over autonomy to Hebron

TEL AVIV, Jan 13 Israel and the Palestinians appeared on the verge of agreement Monday over plans to expand Palestinian autonomy to Hebron and West Bank rural areas after an intense push by Jordan's King Hussein and a US envoy, reports AP.

In a key compromise, Palestinians leader Yasser Arafat told Hussein he would agree to a US proposal to allow Israel to prolong its West Bank pullout by several months to mid-1998, Palestinian officials said.

Meanwhile, Israel and the Palestinians began drafting an agreement Monday under which Israel would withdraw troops from West Bank rural areas in three stages, ending in mid-1998.

The emerging accord also sets the stage for a long-overdue Israeli troop pullback in Hebron. It came after an intense push by Jordan's King Hussein

and US envoy Dennis Ross. In a key compromise, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat told Hussein he would agree to a US proposal to allow Israel to prolong its West Bank pullout which originally was to be completed by September 1997.

Arafat agreed to the compromise after being assured by Ross that the United States would guarantee the Israeli withdrawal in a separate document, to be attached to the agreement.

Hussein flew by helicopter from Gaza to Tel Aviv late Sunday to present the proposal to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who accepted it.

After meeting Hussein, Netanyahu, said only, "We can envision the end of the negotiation in sight." Hussein said he was "confident that everything

will move in the right direction." Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, along with Ross, met Monday morning at a Jerusalem hotel to try and draft the agreement.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat was cautious when asked whether the elusive agreement on Hebron and the West Bank troop pullback could finally be concluded Monday.

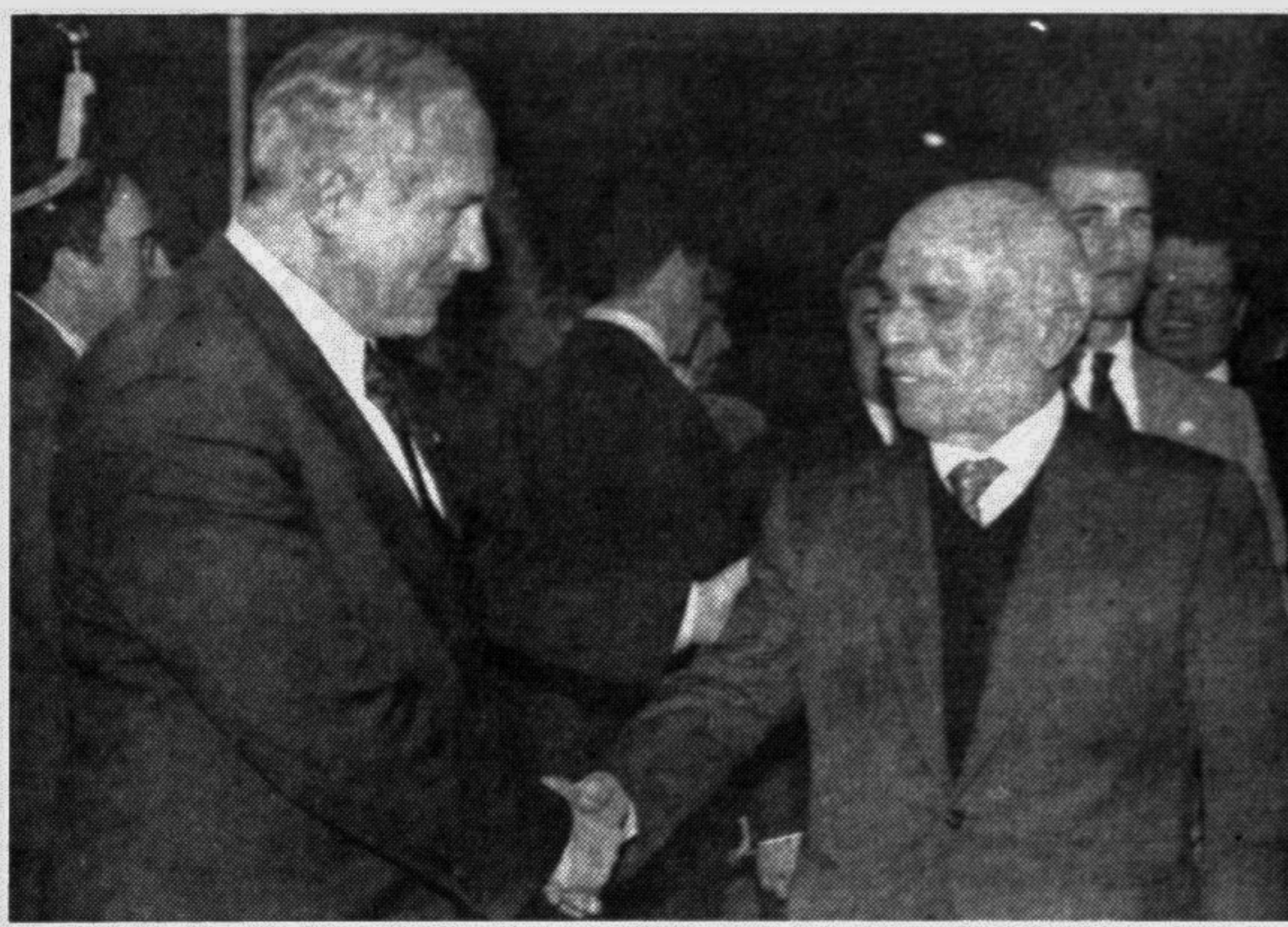
"There are some problems that remain to be resolved," Erakat told The Associated Press. The remaining sticking points include a timetable for the release of Palestinian security prisoners and security arrangements for a Palestinian airport.

Erakat said that once the draft was completed, Netanyahu and Arafat would meet to approve the agreement. Netanyahu was sharply criticised Monday by hard-liners

in his Cabinet, and at least seven ministers in his 18-member Cabinet were expected to vote against the accord. Cabinet approval is not legally required, but it would be difficult for Netanyahu to proceed without the support of a majority of his ministers.

Transportation Minister Yitzhak Levy said Netanyahu was following in the footsteps of his dovish predecessor, Shimon Peres, who negotiated the accords that led to Palestinian self-rule and set the stage for a further Israeli troop withdrawal.

"The difference between the Peres deal and the Netanyahu deal is only 11 months," said Levy of the National Religious Party, a junior partner in Netanyahu's ruling coalition and a patron of the Jewish settlement movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.



King Hussein of Jordan (R) shakes hands with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Sunday in Tel Aviv, where he arrived from the Gaza Strip after meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. — AFP/UNB photo

Coalition politics to continue in India: Gowda

NEW DELHI, Jan 13 Indian Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda who has led a fragile 13-party alliance for seven months, said on Sunday that the country would continue to have coalition governments in the near future, reports Reuter.

The Press Trust of India (PTI) quoted Deve Gowda as telling a public rally in his southern home state of Karnataka that if Italy could have 74 governments in 76 years, there was no reason to worry if Indian governments do not complete their terms.

Some of Deve Gowda's United Front allies say his government, sworn in on June 1 last year following inconclusive elections, would not survive its five-year term.

"Coalition politics will continue in India," Deve Gowda told the rally, adding that the period of single-party rule in India was over.

The United Front coalition government is shored up by the Congress Party.

8 soldiers die as tractor blows up in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Jan 13: At least eight government soldiers were killed when an army tractor was blown up by a Tamil rebel landmine in Sri Lanka's north on Sunday, military officials said, reports Reuter.

Ten soldiers were wounded in the mine explosion at Kachchai, in the northern Jaffna Peninsula, 320 km (200 miles) north of the capital Colombo, the official said on Monday.

In continued violence in the north over the weekend, the rebels killed five soldiers in a pre-dawn raid on Sunday against army defences at Chetikulam in the Vavuniya district, 240 km (150 miles) north of Colombo.

Scientists locate uranium deposits in Andhra Pradesh

NEW DELHI, Jan 13: Atomic scientists have located uranium deposits in northern parts of the Cuddapah Basin of Andhra Pradesh, reports PTI.

The deposits containing significant concentrations of the mineral-0.55 per cent uranium oxide U and negligible amounts of thorium oxide were discovered in a radioactive quartz rock by the Hyderabad-based atomic minerals division of Atomic Energy (DAE).

The main uranium-bearing minerals in the rock are pitchblende, coffinite and others associated with sulphides of copper, lead and iron, a report in "Current Science" says.

The uranium-bearing minerals occur along fractures and cavities in the rock in the Palnad sub-basin of the northern Cuddapah Basin.

BRIEFLY

Tariq Aziz arrives in Jordan: Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz arrived Sunday en route to France on the first such visit since Iraq resumed partial oil exports last month under a deal with the United Nations, AP reports from Amman.

A French foreign ministry spokesman in Paris said Aziz was due in the French capital Monday for talks with Prime Minister Alain Juppe and Foreign Minister Hervé De Charette. Iraqi oil exports resumed for the first time since 1990 where United Nations imposed crippling sanctions on Iraq for its invasion of Kuwait. Iraq is allowed to export 600,000 barrels of oil over a six-month period to buy badly needed food and medicine for its 20 million people.

Gas blast kills 2 in Baroda: Two workers were killed and another injured when a gas boiler exploded in the Sarabhai Chemical Plant in Baroda, Sunday police said, PTI reports from Baroda.

The victims were identified as Sukitu Mayak and Ghan-shyam Bhavsar. The cause of the blast was yet to be ascertained, police said. The general manager of the company, BR Pandya said the specification and design of the boiler had been cleared by the boiler inspector.

Heavy rains claim 3 in Greece: Three men were dead on Sunday and three women were missing in torrential rains in southern Greece and Crete, regional authorities said, AFP reports from Athens.

A 70-year-old man drowned in a bus caught in floodwaters in southern Greece when a bridge collapsed in Solomos, 30 kilometres (18 miles) from Corinth. Another passenger in the bus was missing as well as a woman in a car also caught in the floodwaters.

Gunmen kill 8 in Mexico: Eight Mexicans were gunned down in an ambush in the mountains of the volatile southwestern state of Guerrero, authorities said on Sunday, Reuter reports from Acapulco.

The attack occurred on Saturday in the remote town of San Bartolo in the municipality of San Miguel Totolapan, an area of heavily armed guerrillas and drug traffickers. San Miguel Totolapan Mayor Eddy Julian Gomez said troops were in the town and investigators on their way to examine the bodies.

Chopper crash kills 2 in Japan: A Japanese tourist and an American pilot were killed while three other Japanese tourists were seriously injured in a helicopter crash in Saipan over the weekend, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said yesterday, AFP reports from Tokyo.



Actress Brooke Shields poses with her People's Choice Award for "Favorite Female in a New Series" Sunday while backstage during the telecast of the awards programme. Shields stars in the situation comedy "Suddenly Susan." — Reuter/UNB photo

Lepers in Titagarh see Mother Teresa as their saviour

TITAGARH, Calcutta, Jan 13: Nearly 1,200 lepers once banished from Indian society have found comfort and peace in this small town by running an industry dedicated to their "saint of the gutters" Mother Teresa, reports AFP.

The lepers, some of them ravaged by their affliction, and their families have developed a weaving centre aimed at supporting the order of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who they see as their saviour.

"We pray for Mother Teresa two times a day because she is the roof over our heads, said Katrina, a 45-year-old leper who has been an inmate for 16 years.

Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity started working in Titagarh in 1952 and established the centre, which it still

finances. "She is our god who looks after our well being everyday. If she dies who will take care of us," she said as she sat at one of the 50 looms which produce 6,000 blue trimmed sarees a year for the nuns of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity Order.

The centre also produces all the bed and table linen used in 600 homes, centres and hospices run by her in 129 countries as well as the furniture used in the order's Calcutta headquarters.

Sisters of the order will arrive at the headquarters this week to decide if ailing Mother Teresa should stay on as head of the order she founded 50 years ago.

forced to relinquish her leadership, many residents of her centre at Titagarh will be dismayed to see her step down.

The white and blue-tiled institution, built on the site where a shanty town for lepers stood for two centuries, is manned exclusively by lepers and their relatives — down to the fingerless watch guards who are unable to do any other work.

Its residents say the 86-year-old nun gave them a unique chance of living a life in which they are not reviled by society and believe that she watches over them.

Sudan mobilises troops as rebels attack border towns

CAIRO, Jan 13: Sudanese President Omar el-Bashir on Monday called for a mobilisation of the army and civilian militia after rebel forces attacked towns on the Sudan-Ethiopia border, reports AP.

Egypt's Middle East News Agency said a statement issued by the palace early in the morning said the forces must "defend... the homeland and deter the enemies of Islam and humanity."

The statement used the phrase "jihad," which means holy war.

The mobilisation came after rebels of John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army on Sunday attacked the Sudanese towns of Kurmuk and Qasan near the Ethiopian border, ap-

parently wresting control from the Sudanese army.

The two towns are about 600 kilometres (360 miles) south-east of the Sudanese capital Khartoum.

A statement issued early Monday by the Sudanese armed forces' general command accused Ethiopia of fighting with the Sudanese opposition, MENA said.

It said the fighting for the towns Sunday involved "different kinds of artillery" fired from inside Ethiopian territory and lasted for six hours, died down then resumed for another four hours.

There were no immediate reports of casualties from the remote region.

MENA said state-run Sudan television interrupted its regular programme to broadcast the statement from the military and accompanied it with patriotic songs.

The Sudanese rebels apparently managed to occupy a large swath around the border towns in Blue Nile state, MENA said.

Sudan has an active military force of about 89,000 and paramilitary units known as the Popular Defence Force of about 150,000 men. The militia's reserve is about 60,000 strong.

The Sudan People's Liberation Army has been fighting since 1983 to try to win autonomy for the South's Christians and animists from the Islamic North. More than 1.3 million people have died in the fighting and resulting famines.

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Afghan leaders to meet for talks to end war

ISLAMABAD, Jan 13: A close aide to Afghanistan's Taliban militia chief, Mulla Mohammed Omar, arrived here on Sunday for talks with rival faction leaders aimed at ending the war in Afghanistan, diplomatic sources said, reports AP.

The movement seized Kabul on September 27 and sent Rabbani and his son commander Ahmad Shah Masood fleeing to the north of the country. Fighting has been raging since then.

The talks, under UN auspices, will begin Monday and will be attended by the ousted president Burhanuddin Rabbani's representative, Engineer Eshaq, northern warlord Abdul Rashid Dostam's envoy, General Mohammed Painda, and the Shi'ite Hezb-i-Wahdat faction leader, Rasool Talib, Afghan diplomats here said.

The Afghan Embassy in Islamabad is controlled by the Taliban Islamic militia, which

has gained control of two-thirds of Afghanistan since emerging from Koranic schools in Pakistan two years ago.

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Battle between Bodo rivals leaves 9 dead

GUWAHATI, India, Jan 13: Nine people were killed Monday in a battle between rival militant groups of the Bodo tribe in northeastern India, in the worst single incident since their feud erupted last year, police said, reports AP.

The battle marked an escalation in the war between the long-established Bodo Security Force and the new Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force, which are fighting for control of the movement for a separate state in India.

Early reports reaching police said a unit of the Bodo Security Force raided the village of Mohkuli controlled by their rivals early Monday morning. The village is about 70 kilometres (40 miles) north of the Assam state capital of Guwahati.

In the gun battle that ensued, nine rebels of the Tiger force were killed and the attackers escaped, police said.

In an unrelated incident Monday, unidentified gunmen attacked a hotel in the town of North Lakhimpur, about 400 kilometres (240 miles) north-east of Guwahati, killing the hotel owner and his police bodyguard, police in the state capital said.

The reason for the attack was not immediately clear, but that corner of Assam has been

an area of activity for another militant group, the United Liberation Front of Assam.

Two weeks ago, the Tiger Force claimed responsibility for the worst attack on a civilian target recorded last year, detonating remote-controlled bombs on a New Delhi-bound train that killed at least 34 people.

The same group also claimed to have been behind two other bombs in the last week of December aimed at disrupting road and rail traffic to Assam, the gateway to India's seven isolated northeastern states.

A government report released last week said the Bodo separatist movement claimed 227 lives last year in clashes with Indian security forces or acts of terrorism.

Altogether, nearly 1,000 people were killed by the various insurgent groups in Assam, an ethnically mixed state that is the center of India's tea and oil producing industries.

The violent campaign for a separate state began 10 years ago, but worsened after India signed an agreement with the Bodos in 1993 for a self-governing council. The Bodo leaders who signed the accord later renounced it, claiming the council was ineffective and excluded large tracts of Bodo territory.

US envoy in Cyprus to defuse missile crisis

LARNACA, Cyprus, Jan 13: A senior US envoy has begun efforts to avert a conflict on this divided Mediterranean island, following the Cyprus government's decision to buy Russian anti-aircraft missiles, reports AP.

Upon his arrival Sunday, Carey Cavanaugh called for restraint as he arrived in Cyprus to help defuse rolling tensions sparked by the weapons.

"We are at a critical point, the political situation has worsened, tensions and prospects for conflict are rising, he said.

Turkey has threatened military action to block the missiles from reaching Cyprus, a Mediterranean island split into Greek and Turkish sectors sep-

arated by a UN buffer zone. Greece says any action by Turkey could spark a war.

The United States, which opposed Cyprus plan to deploy the Russian S-300 missile system, has urged Turkey to tone down its belligerent statements.

Cavanaugh blamed Cyprus and Turkey for creating the crisis, which could involve Turkey's NATO ally and rival, Greece.

The United States believes the recent decision to acquire Russian missiles is a mistake, a step down the wrong path. So too has been the Turkish response threatening action, he said.

"Let me make this perfectly clear: there can be no justification for military action.

Ship with N-waste processed in France heads for Japan

CHERBOURG, France, Jan 13: A ship carrying 20 tons of highly radioactive nuclear waste processed in France left for Japan early Monday despite protests by environmentalists, reports AP.

In a final protest, Greenpeace activists spray-painted white radioactive symbols on the pavement and put up signs reading "No more reprocessing" and "France is not a nuclear garbage can."

But the British ship Pacific Teal left port at 7 am (0600 GMT), its two-month itinerary to be announced Tuesday by the French state-owned nuclear processing company Cogema and Japanese electric power companies that produce the waste.

Cogema officials insisted the

double-hulled ship was safe. But New Zealand demanded to know the route, and whether it would pass through the country's 200-mile exclusive economic zone.

The shipment consists of 40 glass blocks of reprocessed waste weighing 1,100 pounds each, originally from a Japanese nuclear power plant.

Under cover of secrecy, the shipment was taken by train Friday from nearby the Cogema processing factory at La Hague to Cherbourg, the environmentalist group Greenpeace said.

In previous shipments since 1992, blocks of vitrified waste were safely transported from Cherbourg to Japan. Greenpeace and countries along potential routes protested, some banning the ships from their waters.

Off the Record

Stone eater!

HONG KONG: Deng Chiyong, 22, feels sick if he does not get his daily dish of stones to eat, according to a Chinese news report Monday, reports AFP.

The inhabitant of Zhidong in the southern province of Hunan eats up to 50 stones a day from a supply used to make roads, the China News Service said.

Deng has eaten the stones, on top of his two bowls of rice a day, and has remained healthy with no visible signs of problems to his heart or stomach, the report said.

He acquired the habit after suffering an epileptic seizure at the age of 10 while tending to the family's goats. To diminish the pain, he swallowed pebbles on the ground and his ailment got better.



The Princess of Wales, Diana, smiles at London's Heathrow Airport late on Sunday before boarding a plane for a Red Cross mission to Angola. — AFP/UNB photo