

## Likud, Labour forge consensus on WB, Gaza

JERUSALEM, Jan 24: They called them the Tuesday meetings. A dozen Israeli parliament members — half from the ruling Likud Party, half from the opposition Labour Party — gathered weekly at a villa in an upscale Jerusalem neighbourhood. They sat around a wooden table and tackled the seemingly impossible task of forging a consensus between Israel's left and right on the future of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, reports AP.

The document emerging after 13 weeks is vague, non-binding, and already slammed by critics as a futile intellectual exercise. Nevertheless, these five pages could guide Israel in final peace talks with the Palestinians.

The authors declare that Israel will agree to the establishment of a Palestinian entity in part of the West Bank and Gaza and will seek to annex most Jewish settlements.

They dodge the key issue of Palestinian statehood. And they insist on a united Jerusalem under Israeli control, an unthinkable concept to the Palestinians, who want East Jerusalem as their capital. But for the Likud, the docu-

ment marks a clear departure from its previous policy of trying to preserve Israeli control over the West Bank and Gaza — and its departure marginalises right-wing ideologists who refuse to change with the times.

"The reality changed, and we have to move on," said Michael Eitan, who led the Likud lawmakers in the discussions.

He and the other authors say they expect their document — to be published in full on Sunday — to guide Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in talks with the Palestinians on a final peace agreement, set to begin in March.

The Tuesday meetings were initiated by Labour's Yossi Beilin, a key aide to the late Premier Yitzhak Rabin. Beilin, a master of quiet diplomacy, set up Israel's secret talks with the PLO in 1993 and last year worked out a rough framework for a final peace accord with Yasser Arafat's deputy, Mahmoud Abbas.

Last fall, Beilin persuaded Eitan that it was time to heal the deep divisions in Israel over the future of the West Bank and Gaza, captured in the 1967 Mideast war.

## Bleak chances of Yeltsin's removal despite ill health

MOSCOW, Jan 24: Despite growing opposition demands that Boris Yeltsin be ousted because he is too ill to run the country, there is little chance he can be removed or that he will ever give up power, reports AP.

So while the politicians engage in futile squabbling over the president's health, Russia is likely to go on drifting aimlessly as its already massive problems get worse. The government, increasingly paralyzed by Yeltsin's absence, seems powerless to turn things around and it has little popular support or credibility.

But the country stumbles on, and no matter how bad things get, most Russians believe Yeltsin will remain in power while he is alive.

Communist and other opposition lawmakers in the Duma, or lower house of parliament, have been calling for Yeltsin's removal. The 65-year-old president has been sidelined for six months, first by heart bypass surgery and more recently by double pneumonia.

Even if the Duma passes

such a motion, it will be mostly symbolic with no legal authority. The lawmakers' legal experts have told them they don't have the power to remove Yeltsin on health grounds.

The Russian constitution, designed by Yeltsin, allows for replacing the president if he suffers a "lasting inability to exercise his powers due to his state of health."

The problem for Yeltsin's critics is that it says nothing more. It says nothing about who can determine the president is too ill to remain in office or how he could be removed.

And nobody has the authority to make a ruling or decision on the issue short of changing the constitution — a lengthy and difficult process that would be blocked by Yeltsin and his powerful supporters.

Unless the president dies, legal experts say, the decision on whether he is healthy enough to serve is almost entirely up to him and the people around him. Russian commentators frequently recall how Leonid Brezhnev and a succession of ailing Soviet leaders were kept in power despite hopeless ill-

nesses. Opposition deputies backing the Duma resolution don't expect Yeltsin to step down. With one eye on the next elections, they are engaged in massive mudslinging, hoping to cripple the government and boost their own future electoral prospects.

Among the many people standing in the wings are ousted security chief Alexander Lebed, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin.

But presidential elections are not due until 2000, unless Yeltsin leaves office. Uncertainty about the president, the weakness of the government and the incessant political squabbling have created a growing impasse.

While the politicians bicker, Russia continues to fall apart. The economy is in decline for a seventh straight year, post-Communist economic reforms have had little impact in many areas, millions of workers and pensioners go months without being paid. The government and the military barely function and corruption grips the government at every level.

## Germany backs India's drive to become UNSC member

NEW DELHI, Jan 24: Germany today backed India's drive to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, but said New Delhi's opposition to a global nuclear test ban pact had set back its chances, reports Reuters.

"We think India is entitled to claim a permanent seat and so India is a candidate whom we support," visiting German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel told a news conference in the Indian capital.

Kinkel, who is also Germany's Vice-Chancellor, said India's UN campaign has been hampered by its firm opposition to the comprehensive test ban treaty. The Security Council currently has five permanent members — the United States, China, France, Britain and Russia.

"There is some connection," Kinkel said. "It would be wrong to deny that some connection does exist."

Kinkel, who was on the second day of a three-day visit, said he had urged the Indian government to press ahead with economic reforms and to open up its financial and insurance sectors.

## Libyan jet flies to Accra defying UN air embargo

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 24: Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi thumbed his nose at the United Nations and at Washington this week when a Libyan airliner landed in Accra despite a UN embargo on flights to Libya, reports AFP.

Tripoli's official news agency Jana reported Thursday a Libyan Arab airlines airplane flew to Accra and returned Thursday to Tripoli in defiance of the UN air embargo imposed on Libya in April 1992.

The news came just as the new UN chief Kofi Annan of Ghana met with US President Bill Clinton in Washington.

The United States was quick to call the flight "a serious violation" of the embargo, said State Department spokesman, Nicholas Burns.

"We will pursue the matter in the UN Security Council and in the sanctions committee at the United Nations," said Burns, who added that Libya "ought to abide by UN Security Council resolutions."

A probe is underway at the United Nations, and the US, British and French delegations were to make contact on the matter today. The issue was to be taken up by the Security Council on Monday, diplomats

said. Ghanaian official in Accra rushed to explain that permission to land was granted because of an emergency.

The Boeing 727 landed Tuesday night after its pilot told the Accra airport control tower he was short of fuel, said the deputy minister, Mohammed Chambas.

## ISRO receives orders from US, French cos

BOMBAY, Jan 24: India's state-owned space research organisation has received orders for space technology equipment from firms in the United States and France. The Economic Times newspaper reported today, reports AFP.

The newspaper said Hughes Space Communication of the United States and Matra Marconi of France had placed orders for "critical components".

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) marketing arm is set to sign a two-million-dollar contract with Hughes for supplying propulsion and other systems it said.

## Albright sworn in as 1st US female secy of state

WASHINGTON, Jan 24: As President Bill Clinton looked on, Madeleine Albright was sworn in on Thursday as the first female US Secretary of State and warned that America's world leadership role could crumble if it becomes complacent, reports AFP.

In an oval office ceremony, Vice President Al Gore administered the oath of office to the Czech-born Albright, 59, as her three daughters stood beside her and Clinton watched over her shoulder.

Albright, unanimously confirmed on Wednesday by the Senate along with William Cohen, who is to be sworn in as Secretary of Defence on Friday, said she would begin her service as the replacement for Warren Christopher "with the wind at my back."

"America is strong, our principles are ascendant and our leadership is accepted and welcomed in most parts of the world," she said. "But if we are complacent or timid or unwilling to look beyond our borders, our citizens will not prosper and the framework of American leadership and the foundation

of American security we have built could crumble with 21st century speed."

She said the United States must "formulate and finance a world-class diplomacy to complement our world-class military" and "must not shy from the mantle of leadership."

Her comments came at a time when Clinton and top aides are considering ways to increase foreign affairs spending by more than 1 billion dollars above this year's level of 18.1 billion dollars.

One Senator who has been an obstacle to increasing such spending, foreign affairs committee chairman Jesse Helms, was at the ceremony and spoke glowingly of Albright afterward.

"This lady has convinced me that she is willing to sit down and negotiate," the North Carolina Republican said. "You can do business with her."

Clinton, who presided over the ceremony, said the Senate's swift 99-0 confirmation of Albright "sends a strong signal of the Senate's willingness to work with us."



Former UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright (2nd-L) is congratulated by US Vice-President Al Gore (R) as US President Bill Clinton (L) and Albright's daughter Katie (2nd-R) look on after being sworn in as the new US secretary of State in ceremonies at the White House in Washington Thursday. Albright succeeds William Christopher and is the first woman to hold the position of Secretary of State. —AFP/UNB photo

## Clinton firm to pay US debt to UN

WASHINGTON, Jan 24: US President Bill Clinton said Thursday he was determined to pay the US debt to the United Nations "in a prompt fashion," but warned that he would attach strings to budget proposals, reports AP.

Clinton, speaking to reporters at the White House after talks with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, said that "as a practical matter I know I can't secure support (in Congress) unless they are convinced reform is going forward."

"Clinton's statement was the first public confirmation that he intended to propose to the Republican-dominated Congress the payment of US arrears to the world body."

According to the United Nations, Washington owes 1.3 billion dollars while the US administration says that one billion is owed.

Annan, who stood next to Clinton in the White House Roosevelt Room, pledged to pursue the reform effort, and said he was "encouraged that the US will do its part."

## 'Dalai Lama distorting truth about Tibet'

BEIJING, Jan 24: The exiled Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama is distorting the truth about his homeland with "groundless bad news," an official commentary said Friday, reports AP.

The article, in the official newspaper China Daily, reiterated Chinese accusations that the Dalai Lama is a puppet of anti-Chinese Westerners.

"Wearing the cloak of religion, the Dalai Lama has served his Western hosts and sponsors by ferociously attacking the Chinese government and spreading rumors about the situation in Tibet," it said.

The central government has been conducting a campaign against the spiritual leader of Tibet, claiming he is trying to split the region away from China. Such commentaries in the state-run media reflect high-level government thinking.

The Dalai Lama fled to India along with 100,000 followers after an abortive uprising against Chinese rule in 1959.

The commentary also chastised the Western media, saying it is prejudiced against China. It refuted reports that mil-

lions of Tibetans have died from torture, execution and starvation under Chinese rule and that the government has forced the Tibetan minority to undergo forced sterilisation and abortions.

It claimed that of the 1 million people living in Tibet in 1950, when Chinese troops occupied the region, 900,000 were homeless. Of the 20,000 people living in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa at the time, more than 1,000 families relied on begging to survive, it said.

It noted that official surveys show Tibetans now have much more living space, on average.

The Dalai Lama concluded that there is cultural genocide in Tibet and that the Tibetans are living in hell," it said.

"It seems that, to the Dalai Lama, heaven means Tibetans living in the wilderness and working as poor serfs."

It noted that although some parts of old Lhasa are being pulled down to make way for new buildings, as in other parts of China, the government has spent millions of dollars to renovate key religious sites, such as Lhasa's Potala Palace.

## BRIEFLY

**Tiger kills 35 children in Nepal:** Villagers in western Nepal's Baitadi district have been terrorised by a man-eating tiger that has killed 35 children in recent days, news reports said yesterday. Reuter reports from Kathmandu.

The state-owned RSS news agency said the wild cat in Baitadi has been attacking people at "slightest chance" in the evenings. It did not say when the attacks began. "People... do not dare to venture out from their houses due to the terror unleashed by the man-eater tiger," RSS quoted Chandra Mohan Tiwari, a resident in Kumaun village in west Nepal, as saying.

**LTTE rebels kill 5 soldiers:** Tamil Tiger guerrillas ambushed an army patrol in north-eastern Sri Lanka yesterday, killing five soldiers and wounding another, officials said, AFP reports from Colombo.

Gunmen of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) attacked the soldiers at Sirimangalapura in the district of Trincomalee. The officials said adding that the rebels escaped with weapons of their victims.

**Biggest corruption trial in Vietnam:** Vietnam's biggest corruption trial entered its second day yesterday accompanied by a media onslaught against graft and calls for the judiciary to halt "declining confidence" in the Communist government. Reuter reports from Hanoi.

Official newspapers splashed coverage of the first day's proceedings across front pages. Photographs showed grim-faced defendants with bowed heads. Several are on trial for their lives.

**4 unionists freed in ROK:** South Korean police have released four arrested unionists after state prosecutors dropped charges against them for leading illegal strikes in protest at a new labour law, a prosecution official said on Friday. Reuter reports from Seoul.

The official said that 15 other outstanding arrest warrants for leaders of the outlawed Korean Confederation of Trade Unions would be returned to several courts, thus invalidating them. Another detained unionist was freed on Wednesday.

**NATO seizes arms in Bosnia:** NATO troops seized a cache of military equipment, including an anti-tank rocket and land-mines, from Bosnian Croat police in the southern city of Mostar Wednesday, a NATO spokesman said Thursday. AFP reports from Sarajevo.

A joint patrol of troops from the NATO-led Stabilisation Force (SFOR) and UN police seized the weapons cache, which included 85 hand-grenades and two rifle grenades, from a police station in the city Wednesday.

**Canadian PM on France visit:** Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien continued his official visit to France Thursday by telling his hosts to turn their eyes more onto the Asia-Pacific region, AFP reports from Paris.

Emerging from a meeting with President Jacques Chirac, Chretien reasserted his government's view that the 21st century will belong to the Pacific Rim — and indicated that Europe must adjust to that new reality. The preoccupation right now for all governments is the economic situation and the presence in the Pacific," he said.

**Rebels fire rocket in Srinagar:** Kashmiri separatists fired a rocket in an attempt to blow up the venue of India's Republic Day celebrations in Srinagar, police said yesterday. AFP reports from Srinagar.

A spokesman said the rocket flew over the Bakshi Stadium before exploding in the air without causing any damage. He said the missile had been fired early yesterday from the Seluna quarter of the city, which had been cordoned off. Police and military personnel were carrying out house-to-house searches following the attack.

**Quakes shake Irian Jaya town:** Two earthquakes measuring 5.1 and 5.7 on the open-ended Richter scale shook Wamena town in Indonesia's Irian Jaya province yesterday but there were no reports of casualties or damage, a meteorology official said. Reuter reports from Jakarta.

The official from Jayapura, capital of Irian Jaya, told Reuters the first quake measuring 5.7 on Richter scale shook Wamena early last morning with the epicentre located 80 km (50 miles) northwest of the town. Wamena is located near Jayapura, on the western side of New Guinea Island.

## Rabbani, Hekmatyar in Iran for peace talks on Afghanistan

TEHRAN, Jan 24: Ousted Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani and Prime Minister Golbuddin Hekmatyar are in Iran for peace talks on Afghanistan, but their arch-rival, the Taliban Islamic militia, failed to attend, the Official Irna news agency said, reports AP.

Rabbani and Hekmatyar, whose government in Kabul was toppled by the Taliban in September, arrived late Thursday for the talks to begin Saturday.

The leader of the pro-Iranian Hezb-i-Wahdat, Mohammad Akbari, and a representative from Uzbek warlord general Abdul Rashid Dostam, are also here.

## Rafsanjani warns Iran to respond vigorously to any US threat

TEHRAN, Jan 24: Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said Thursday his country "will respond vigorously" to any threat by the United States, which he said seeks to create conditions for a strike against Iran, reports AP.

Tehran "will respond vigorously" to any US military measure and will prove to the whole world Iran's real power," said Rafsanjani.

He added that Washington "hasn't spared any effort since 1979 in its hostility against Iran which is determined to counter all US measures in the future."

## Griffiths says Aid agencies urgently needed to work outside Kisangani

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 24: The situation of about 400,000 refugees and internally displaced people in eastern Zaire could reach crisis proportions if aid agencies are not allowed to operate outside Kisangani, UN Humanitarian Aid Coordinator Martin Griffiths said Thursday, reports AFP.

"Access to this population is becoming more and more difficult," Griffiths told a press conference.

He said Kinshasa had forbade the agencies from going outside Kisangani into the region where skirmishes between rebel Tutsi-led troops and government soldiers are taking place.

Griffiths said it was "perfectly understandable" that Zairean authorities would try to recover territories taken by the rebels in the last few months.

## Turkish govt urged to free jailed editor

NEW YORK, Jan 24: More than 300 leading US journalists, media executives and human rights activists on Thursday asked the Turkish government immediately to free jailed Editor Ocak Isik Yurtcu, now in the third year of an almost 16 years sentence, reports Reuter.

A petition was handed to Turkish Ambassador Nuzhet Kandemir at the Turkish embassy in Washington by officials of the committee to protect journalists which last November gave Yurtcu its International Press Freedom Award.

Yurtcu was sentenced to jail for allegedly publishing "separatist propaganda" about the conflict with Kurdish insurgents under Turkey's anti-terrorism laws.



Two Palestinian children flash the victory sign in their makeshift camp in the no-man's land on the Egyptian-Libyan border on Wednesday. Some 250 Palestinians kicked out of Libya 15 months ago remained Thursday, 48 hours after rejecting Libya's offer to let them return. — AFP/UNB photo

## US Congress leaders for steps towards UN reforms

WASHINGTON, Jan 24: Despite President Clinton's pledge to telling Secretary-General Kofi Annan they want to see specific steps toward UN reforms before releasing the funds, reports AP.

Sen Jesse Helms, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told Annan on Thursday that he will introduce legislation, possibly next week, setting down unspecified "benchmarks" for UN reform, with rewards forthcoming "as those benchmarks are met."

Annan received a strong endorsement from President Clinton, who told him the United States "cannot expect to lead through the United Nations unless we are prepared to pay our own way and to pay what we owe."

Nations says it owes. The Clinton administration puts the figure at about 900 million dollars.

The 58-year-old Ghanaian was delivering that message again Friday during meetings with House Speaker Newt Gingrich and the chairman of the House and Senate appropriations committees.

He also was addressing the National Press Club before returning to New York.

"In the weeks ahead, I will be working with Congress to reach an agreement through which America can pay our arrears to the UN, meet our obligations, and continue to spur real progress," Clinton said.

But Annan's meetings later in the day on Capitol Hill underscored the deep divisions between the United States and the United Nations on the twin issues of reform and the US debt.

A UN official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Annan told Helms and other members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he was "uncomfortable" with the idea of the United States setting down "benchmarks" as conditions for paying its debts.

Annan recommended that Senate and UN staffs work together to identify reform measures which could be undertaken. Helms agreed.

But the prospect of Congress laying down conditions for paying the US debt is unlikely to sit well with the majority of the 185 UN member states.

Britain, France and other major powers have said repeatedly that the United States is required by international treaty to pay its UN dues unconditionally and on time.

"He's got a constituency of 184 other member states," the UN official said of Annan. "He has to appear even-handed. He's walking a fine line here."

Annan was elected last month after the United States vetoed a second term for Boutros Boutros-Ghali because he was allegedly sluggish in promoting reform. Annan, a 30-year career UN bureaucrat and former head of UN peace-keeping operations, was widely considered to be America's candidate.

During the meeting with Helms committee, a UN official said Annan was repeatedly asked whether the United States was infringing on US sovereignty by plans for a "UN tax" on international airline tickets, currency transactions and communications.

Some European countries have proposed such a levy to raise money for the United Nations. But the Clinton administration and Congress strongly oppose the idea as a violation of national independence.

Annan told the senators that he also opposes such a "UN tax" and that the United Nations had no intention of eroding American sovereignty.

But he also said some global issues transcend national borders and asked the senators if they would accept China's contention that human rights in that country is a purely domestic issue.

American conservatives have spoken out strongly against China's record on human rights.