

Chandrika set to offer Tamils greater autonomy

COLOMBO, Jan 25: When President Chandrika Kumaratunga swept to power on a platform promising peace, she offered an olive branch to the Tamil Tigers in a bid to end the rebel's protracted guerilla war, reports AFP.

More than two years, and thousands of killings, late, the country is still embroiled in ethnic violence and Kumaratunga is promising a new political revolution "to halt the unending bloodshed."

The 50-year-old President, a member of the majority Sinhalese community, is set to offer the minority Tamils the political carrot of greater autonomy where the military stick has failed to end the war which has claimed over 50,000 lives since 1972.

The President told the foreign correspondents' association of Sri Lanka at a dinner meeting Friday that she was

determined to press ahead with sweeping political reforms despite constitutional impediments. The main hurdle is that her People's Alliance party lacks the necessary two-thirds majority in the National Assembly.

"If the majority of the people want a change, the constitution should not stand in the way," the President said adding that she will not hesitate to go for a radical "constitutional revolution."

The Tiger guerillas no longer figure prominently in the political efforts to settle the conflict, Kumaratunga asserted.

Soon after coming to power in November 1994 she offered the "hand of friendship" to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the most powerful Tamil separatist group, only to get her fingers burnt it was nothing new for the Tigers who had broken off previous peace

deals.

"Much water has flowed under the bridge since then," Kumaratunga said. "We were very sincere in starting a dialogue with them (the LTTE) in 1994."

"I believe that now it is more important to deal with the Tamil people directly and get them to agree to a settlement. If the LTTE does not support a political package the people will reject them."

The President has already unveiled a radical power-sharing plan, offering increased powers to Tamils in exchange for peace. She has been frustrated by a constitutional requirement of a two third majority in parliament.

Kumaratunga's People's Alliance coalition has a mere one-seat majority in the 225-member legislature and depends on the main opposition United National Party to push the devolution package through parliament.

Tragic

WASHINGTON, Jan 25: Ten children were found abandoned in a squalid crack house without water, electricity or heat in Atlantic City, authorities said yesterday, reports Xinhua.

The children aged 1 to 16 year old, were found on Thursday when a neighbour reported that the house was reeked of kerosene, according to an Associated Press report there were no signs that an adult lived with them, it said.

The children were taken to Atlantic City medical centre for evaluation today. The relationships of the children were unclear and they were said from Trenton, Camden or Philadelphia.

They were bringing buckets of water into use in a toilet. A pair of bedsprings served as the back door in the two-story structure. The 1-year-old was living in makeshift crib on a bed, the report said, quoting authorities.

An aunt of at least one of the children lived down the streets and was checking on them from time to time, but no adults were staying at the house, the report said.



Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (L) takes his oath Saturday during the swearing-in of the new cabinet witnessed by Singaporean President Ong Teng Cheong (R) at the City Hall. Goh said he intends to go the maximum distance before calling the next general election due in the middle of year 2002.

S'pore PM intends to groom next batch of leaders

SINGAPORE, Jan 25: Singapore's prime minister took office for another term Saturday, saying he now intends to groom the next batch of leaders who can preserve the hard-earned prosperity amassed by the city's founding fathers, reports AP.

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said his predecessor, Lee Kuan Yew, who stepped down in 1990 after three decades in power, showed how "planned and orderly succession has benefited all in Singapore."

"Hence I am getting the next team ready, so that they can take over the torch, without faltering," said Goh after taking the oath of office along with 15 ministers in his Cabinet.

But Goh did not say if that means he also will step down after completing his latest term in 2002.

Goh said the next five years will give him time to assess which of the new lawmakers have the potential to become ministers who "will help to realise our vision of a prosperous, cosmopolitan Singapore."

Off the Record

A defeat to sex industry

TAIPEI: Taipei's mayor is admitting defeat after a four-month crackdown on the sex industry, and says the Taiwanese capital will have to learn to live with it, reports AP.

"We can't ask our citizens or tourists not to have any nightlife in this city," Chen Shui-bian said.

"If we can't eliminate the sex industry, we have to admit it," he told reporters Thursday.

Chen, who recently visited Singapore, suggested copying the city state's practice of not prosecuting prostitutes who have certificates proving they are healthy.

Prostitution is not illegal in Taiwan, but the sex industry thrives largely in unlicensed premises, and these have come under police pressure since September.

Men and women wrapped in towels were arrested at brothels disguised as saunas and barber shops, and fined for up to 6,000 Taiwan dollars (US 220 dlr) for offending public morality.

Also raided were bars offering scantily clad waitresses.

Sex industry employees have taken to the streets to protest that the crackdown threatens their livelihood.

Bones of new species of flesh eating dinosaur found

LONDON: Geologists in southern England say they have found bones of a new species of flesh-eating dinosaur that lived more 120 million years ago, reports AP.

"This is the first flesh-eating dinosaur to come out of Europe for the last 10 to 15 years," Steve Hutt, curator of the Museum of Isle of Wight Geology, said Thursday. "The completeness of the skeleton makes it important."

The 26-foot (7.9 metres) long reptile, Neovenator salerii, weighed 3/4 of a ton and had a yard-(metre) long skull armed with razor-sharp teeth, and limbs with claws up to 5 inches (13 cm) long.

It fed on a diet of herbivorous animals. Hutt said the Neovenator was half way in size between Velociraptors — the small carnivores featured in the film, "Jurassic Park" — and the Tyrannosaurus rex.

"It was a delicate animal and didn't have the massive head Tyrannosaurus had," said Hutt. "It probably brought its prey down with its feet and hands, and let its head behave like a vulture's, disemboweling things," said Hutt.

Hutt said Neovenator salerii was a cousin of the Allosaurus, skeletons of which have been found in the United States. It is also distantly related to the Tyrannosaurus rex, which lived some 50 million years later.

Hutt said Neovenator salerii — its takes its name from the Salero family on whose land it was found — had a tall more than half the length of its body to act as a counterbalance. It ran on its hind legs and was quicker and lighter than the Allosaurus, weighing about 3/4 of a ton.

40 more killed in Algiers violence

ALGIERS, Algeria, Jan 25: Algeria's president has broken his official silence to condemn the terror attacks that have brutalised this North African nation but the toll continues to rise, reports AP.

In the latest atrocity, witnesses reported that 40 people had their throats slit Friday in a village south of Algiers. That brought the total known death toll to 250 in just 15 days.

Some of the victims in the village of Ouled Ali, 90 kms (60 miles) south of the capital, were decapitated or dismembered, said the witnesses, who were traveling in the area.

Islamic militants fighting the military-backed regime have vowed to make this Ramadan, the Muslim holy month that began January 10, a "bloody" one.

President Liamine Zeroual's speech Friday was the first official comment on the recent resurgence in violence. Opposition parties had lashed out at authorities for their silence.

In his 20-minute speech on state television, the Algerian leader did not specify what foreign powers he was blaming. In the past, he has chastised Euro-

pean governments for harbouring sympathisers of Islamic militants, and countries like Iran and Sudan for backing them.

He also made no direct reference to specific groups behind the attacks, and did not suggest any new measures to combat terror.

"In this holy month of Ramadan, a month of forgiveness and worship, Algeria faces barbaric, cowardly terrorism," Zeroual said.

"These barbaric acts were committed by the same gangs known to all, the gangs who have hidden themselves behind a call for peace," he said.

Denouncing the "foreign support and bases of terrorism," he added:

"Those who support terrorism ... I tell them that they cannot get involved in our country's affairs."

The president also said the attackers, whom he called "criminals, traitors and mercenaries," were striking at the most helpless people in isolated regions. And he said they were getting more violent with the approach of legislative elec-

Troops on red alert in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 25: Hundreds of Indian troops were on high alert today across the Kashmir Valley ahead of the country's Republic Day Sunday which the rebels have vowed to sabotage, reports AFP.

The security forces set up several check points on the streets of Srinagar, frisked passers-by and launched random house-to-house searches for Muslim separatists and hidden weapons, police said.

Army soldiers armed with heavy weapons were out on the streets patrolling. They were backed by hundreds of paramilitary troops and Kashmir police.

The security was heavy near Srinagar's Bakshi Sports Stadium where Kashmir government officials will oversee a military parade to mark India's Republic Day Sunday.

Some residents nearby said they had shifted to the homes of relatives and friends elsewhere after the army declared an unofficial curfew.

New cabinet sworn in in Singapore

SINGAPORE, Jan 25: Singapore's new Cabinet was sworn in here today by President Ong Teng Cheong, with Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong calling for further efforts to build a confident and gracious society," reports Xinhua.

Speaking at the swearing-in ceremony held at the City Hall Chamber, Goh said he intended to go the maximum distance before calling the next general election, due in the middle of 2002.

"This will give my team and me sufficient time to give the new MPs the widest exposure, and to assess who among them can make it as office elders. They will help to realise our vision of a prosperous, cosmopolitan Singapore," he said.

Prime Minister Goh announced his new Cabinet lineup last Saturday, 16 days after the general election on January 2.

Singapore was an improbable nation when it suddenly became independent in 1965. The pre-independence generation made it viable and successful," he said.

Leghari determined to hang Zardari: Benazir

LONDON, Jan 25: Deposed premier Benazir Bhutto has warned that the Pakistani authorities are determined to hang her husband Asif Ali Zardari for allegedly ordering the killing of her brother, she said in an interview published in London today in the Guardian, reports AFP.

Bhutto was dismissed last November by President Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari on accusations of corruption, nepotism and misrule.

Her estranged brother Mur-taza Bhutto and his seven colleagues were killed in a police shoot-out on September 20.

Speaking in Islamabad during a break from campaigning for next month's election, Bhutto told the British daily: "A friend told me yesterday (Thursday) that Leghari had said: 'Tell Benazir to forget about Asif — we're going to hang him.'"

Bhutto has linked the Pakistani President to her brother's death, and has said that the killing was part of a conspiracy against her family and government.

Police say that Mur-taza was killed accidentally in a gun-fight started by his bodyguards.

Asif Ali Zardari is currently being investigated for the shooting of his brother-in-law.

Bhutto's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was hanged in 1979 for conspiracy to murder, two years after being ousted as prime minister in a military coup led by General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq.

Clinton, Bush jointly announce summit on community service

WASHINGTON, Jan 25: In a show of bipartisanship President Clinton and former President Bush announced plans Friday for an April summit on community service and volunteerism. Retired Army Gen. Colin Powell will run the Philadelphia meeting, reports AP.

"Citizens service belongs to no party, no ideology. It is an American idea which every American should embrace," Clinton said in an East Room ceremony attended by Bush and Powell.

Bush said volunteerism "is not partisan politics, one side against another."

Former Presidents Carter and Reagan have pledged their support for the April 27-29 event.

"Much of the work of America cannot be done by government," Clinton said. "The solution must be the American people, through voluntary services to others."

Taliban refuse peace talks to be held in Tehran

ISLAMABAD, Jan 25: The Taliban Islamic militia today refused to join peace talks with rival Afghan leaders in the Iranian capital, dubbing Tehran as partisan, Taliban officials said, reports AFP.

"The Taliban movement has sent no delegation" for the conference which was to open in Tehran Saturday, a senior Taliban official speaking from the militia's Kandahar headquarters in southwestern Afghanistan said.

"We have sent no delegation to Tehran as we consider Iran is not neutral" in the Afghan conflict, said Mulla Abdul Jalil, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Taliban administration.

US-Russia ties to move ahead, says Albright

WASHINGTON, Jan 25: In a signal to Moscow and the world, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said the strong US-Russia relationship will move forward with or without ailing President Boris Yeltsin in charge, reports AP.

With word from the Kremlin that Yeltsin was indefinitely postponing a summit with the leaders of former Soviet republics, Albright said, "Clearly it is possible for us to do business with the Russian government" in his absence.

Prime Minister Viktor Chernenyrdin will come to Washington on February 5 for meetings with Vice President Al Gore, and both sides recognize a good relationship "is paramount to our interests," Albright said at a news conference Friday on her first full day as secretary of state.

She said she based her statements on a report from Strobe Talbott, the deputy secretary who is en route home from Kremlin meetings. She sidestepped assessing Yeltsin's health while wishing him well.

Arriving early at her seventh-floor suite on Friday, Albright declared she was "all set to go" and followed up at a news conference with a promise to be "open and available" in making a case for US foreign policy.

She said she would go to Asia and Europe next month. It is likely to be an around-the-world journey, and stops in Moscow and Beijing are known to be under consideration.

Human rights in China will be at the top of the agenda "when I meet with them," she said. But Albright also stressed US relations with China "cannot be held hostage" to that issue or the way China manages the return of Hong Kong on July 1.

The trip will reinforce the quarter-century-old tradition that American secretaries of state do a lot of their work on the road.

41 Jihad rebels held in Egypt

CAIRO, Jan 25: Forty-one members of the militant Islamic group Jihad have been arrested on their return from Albania and Afghanistan where they were trained to carry out attacks on security officials, a government weekly said, reports AFP.

Akhbar al-Yom, in its Saturday edition, reported that the arrests were made in the Cairo region and in Shargiya, north-east of the capital, it did not give a date.

The group was planning to assassinate security officials, to sabotage economic institutions and attack tourism targets in a bid to wreck the economy, it charged, adding that the militants were trained in Albania and Afghanistan.

"The Jihad has set up centres in nine countries: five Arab states, three European and an Asian country," said Akhbar al-Yom without naming them.



US actress and AIDS activist Elizabeth Taylor (L) and Shahpari Khashoggi of "Survive — The International Children's Appeal", pose prior to a press conference Friday in Beverly Hills, CA. Taylor announced she will help the charitable group by holding a fund-raising event on her birthday in February in Istanbul.

Islam playing larger role in Chechnya as Russians leave

GROZNY, Russia, Jan 25: Since Muslim separatists captured Chechnya's capital five months ago, they've banned alcohol, established Islamic courts, cracked down on prostitution and begun religious instruction in their schools, reports AP.

And as Monday's presidential election nears, candidates take pains to stress their Islamic credentials during speeches in mountain villages and in posters plastered all over the war-ravaged capital.

"Islam, independence, order," read the banners of Aslan Maskhadov, one of the front-runners.

Chechnya has been a predominantly Muslim territory for centuries, but Soviet rule placed strict limits on all religions, and Moscow was particularly wary of the Islamic people

to the south, both in the Caucasus Mountains and farther east in Central Asia.

Now that the Russians are gone, Chechens are looking to Islam for direction — in life and in politics. And when politicians tout Muslim values, the message is pro-independence for Chechnya, and anti-Russia.

"Islam is playing a larger and larger role in Chechnya, and people are happy with this," Mullah Shahid Yunus declared after delivering the midday sermon Friday at a packed mosque on a hillside overlooking Grozny.

Islamic practice here traditionally has been mainstream and moderate, and it appears unlikely that the independence sought by the Chechens would result in a fundamentalist state.

At present, religious figures do not hold any senior political or military positions in Chechnya, and the presidential and parliamentary elections are expected to be dominated by men who made their names in the guerrilla war with Russia.

"If Russia and other countries want stability in the Caucasus, they must understand that it's only possible through Islamic order," said Chechen Vice Premier Mowladi Udugov, a presidential candidate. "We now have thousands of people with weapons and only Islam will be able to keep this problem under control."

Unlike the rest of Russia, Chechnya for some time has kept to the Muslim practice of setting aside Fridays for rest and religious services, while Saturdays and Sundays are working days.

After the Chechen rebels captured Grozny in August and signed a peace deal with Russia, Chechen leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev moved quickly to introduce many more Islamic practices.

Alcohol officially was banned, something unthinkable elsewhere in Russia, with its well-deserved reputation for heavy drinking.

Sharia, or Islamic law, was introduced in November in Chechnya and courts have been established in Grozny and other towns.

The Sharia courts have sentenced some convicts to 40 lashes, though the practice has been suspended temporarily during the election period. In one case, a Sharia court convicted a driver of killing a man in a traffic accident and ordered him to pay 63 camels as com-

pen-sation to the victim's family.

Compensating crime victims with camels and other property has a long history in Islamic law, but when someone noted that there are no camels in Chechnya, the penalty was converted into a fine.

The Sharia court system appears to have widespread support among ordinary Chechens, though crime is still a serious problem in the republic as the former rebels seek to establish full government authority.

Under Soviet rule, it was not possible to teach Islam in the classroom, but religious instruction has been introduced in some schools.

"We must now teach Islam in all schools, beginning at the early ages," said Yunus, the Islamic preacher, a general man who was warmly greeted by the

men who filled his mosque.

Yunus also said that Chechnya will be looking to other Muslim countries as it seeks help to rebuild from the devastating war that killed thousands and left the capital in ruins.

But so far, Muslim nations have been restrained in their support of Chechnya for fear of angering Russia, which says Chechnya will not be allowed to secede. Nearby countries such as Turkey and Iran both have good relations and growing trade ties with Moscow, and would not want to jeopardise those links.

But Yunus said he was optimistic.

"We have lost contact with Muslim countries," he said. "For us, it is very important to build those relations, and I think we will."

250 houses built on Pharaonic tombs demolished in Egypt

CAIRO, Jan 25: The Egyptian government has demolished about 250 houses built on top of Pharaonic tombs near the southern town of Luxor, fulfilling a long-standing dream of the antiquities department, the head of the department said, reports Reuter.

The houses are at the village of Qurna on the west bank of the Nile, a few miles from the valley of the kings where Tutankhamun and other famous pharaohs are buried.

The government had tried for decades to move the villagers to save the tombs from illicit digging and give Egyptologists a chance to examine and record them.

Earlier this century traditionalist Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy built the villagers

a widely acclaimed Mudbrick village, a few kms (miles) away but people refused to move in.

Alli Hassan, Secretary-General of the state's Supreme Council for Antiquities, told a news conference on Thursday night that the provincial governor had just told him of the demolitions.

"I'm happy that after almost 200 years we have been able to move the Qurna houses which were resting on the tombs of the nobles. Nearly 250 houses have been demolished," he said.

"Some of these tombs are absolutely unknown to us, even to whom they belong. I hope that some time in April, two or three of these tombs, which were imprisoned for so long, will be preserved and available for anyone to see," he added.

