

Thousands of non-Pashtoons expelled from Gulbahar, Tehran talks end Taliban renew ceasefire offer, rule out power-sharing deal

KABUL, Jan 27: Afghanistan's Islamic Taliban militia renewed a ceasefire offer to its weakened opponents today, but ruled out any power-sharing deal. 'We have been keen on the idea of a ceasefire from the very beginning,' Acting Information Minister Amir Khan Mutaqi told Reuters. 'We want an immediate ceasefire now, with an exchange of prisoners to take place on the first day it is enforced.'

The Taliban have inflicted major defeats on Masood and Dostum North of Kabul in the past two weeks, driving them back to positions the Islamic militia occupied and then lost after it captured the Afghan capital on September 27. The latest ceasefire offer followed the conclusion of talks among Afghan factions in Tehran that were boycotted by the Taliban on the grounds that Iran was not a neutral party. Earlier AFP adds: The Taliban Islamic militia is expelling several thousand non-Pashtoon residents from strategic Gulbahar district to pave off any attempted uprising, frontline commanders and locals said Sunday. 'We have told them to leave the area because they revolt against us. They pass on our military secrets to the other side,' Mulla Amir Mohammad, a Taliban commander in Gulbahar, said. They forced exodus adds to the 50,000 people reported to aid agencies to have fled to Kabul in recent days. Gulbahar is mainly inhabited by ethnic Tajik people while the Taliban force is made up of Pashtoons. 'They will hatch conspiracies if we let them stay,' said Mohammad, whose 220 soldiers man frontline positions at the month of the Panjsher Valley, the home base of the ousted Afghan government's chief military commander Ahmad Shah Masood. Senior Taliban authorities have previously denied any forced evacuation saying residents left areas captured by the Islamic militia for their own safety. Another Reuter report says: Afghan factions opposed to the Islamic Taliban militia ended a two-day conference in Tehran on Sunday with a call for an immediate ceasefire and an exchange of prisoners of war (POW). 'Taliban missed their chance of an intra-Afghan dialogue for a peaceful settlement of the crisis,' Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati said. 'The participants called for an immediate ceasefire, the creation of a safe and secure environment in Kabul and the exchange of POWs,' said a statement issued at the end of the talks. 'The sharing of power by all parties in the structure of the national government is indispensable.' Iranian newspapers differed in their evaluation of the Tehran talks.

Troops launch offensive against Tripura rebels

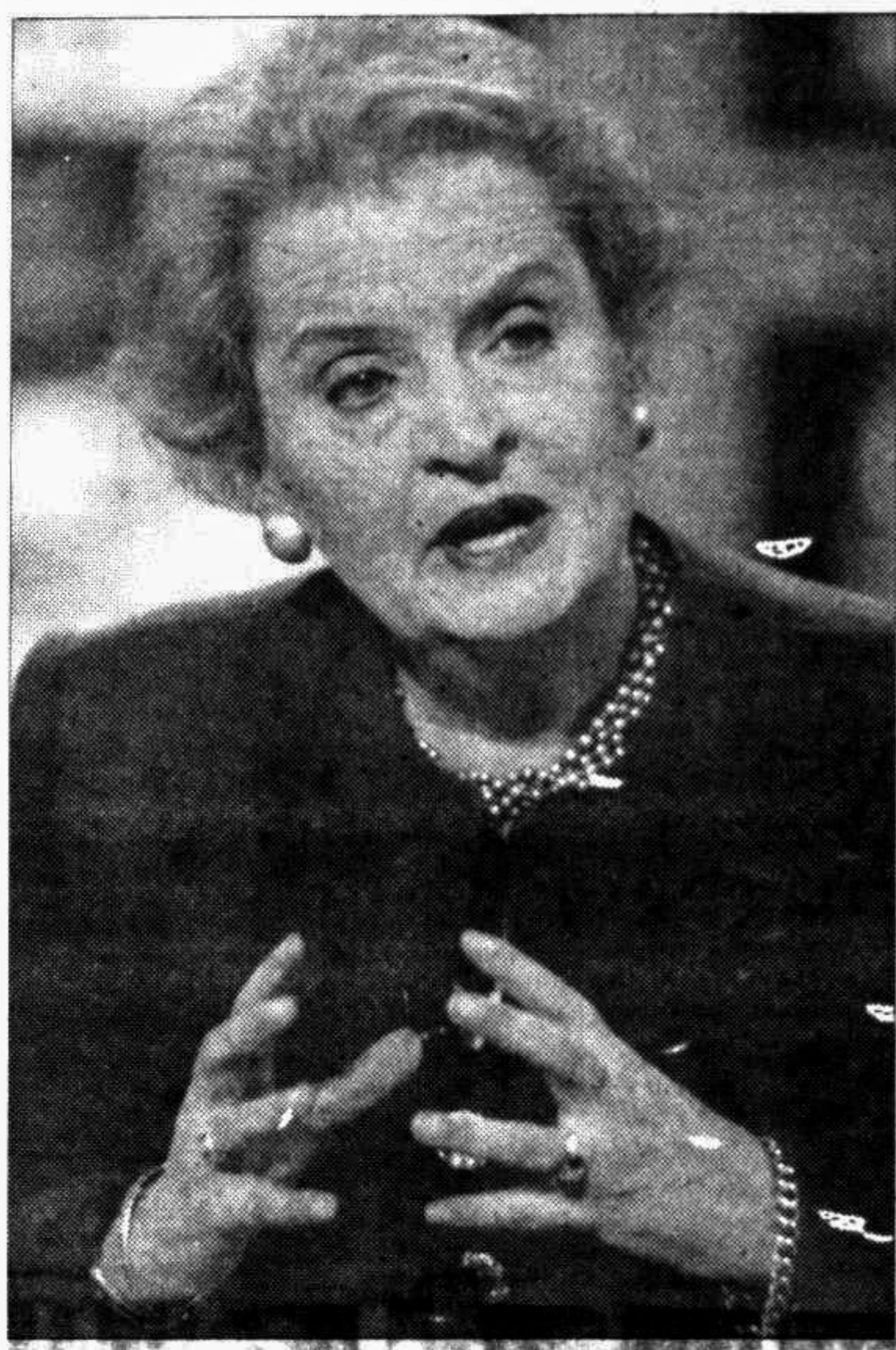
NEW DELHI, Jan 27: Indian security forces today launched a massive offensive against tribal separatist militants in the northeastern state of Tripura, officials said, reports AFP. Joint police and paramilitary units were deployed after the guerrillas refused to surrender their weapons before the expiry of a deadline on Sunday. The United News of India (UNI) said the operation would continue until 'the extremists either laid down their arms or were flushed out of hideouts in the small state bordering Bangladesh. Tripura, with a population of about three million, has been wracked by recurring violence, blamed on three tribal groups that want their own separate state. Tripura Chief Minister Dasaratha Deb — himself a tribal — had urged the rebels, estimated to be in the hundreds, to surrender before January 26, India's Republic Day.



An unidentified observer (L) of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and local Chechen election officials examine an empty ballot box before sealing it at a polling station in Grozny, Sunday. — AFP/UNB photo

Imran to make Pakistan model Islamic state if he comes to power

BONN, Jan 27: Pakistani cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan says that if he came to power in a general election next month he would like to make his country a model Islamic state, German news magazine Der Spiegel reported on Sunday, says Reuter. 'Our task is now to make a model Islamic state out of Pakistan such as the world has never seen,' Khan said in an interview with the magazine which was released ahead of publication today. The former Pakistan cricket captain launched his Tehreek-e-Insaf (Justice Movement) last April and is standing in the country's National Assembly elections on February 3. Khan, who last month demanded the death penalty be introduced for corruption, said that if in power he would want to launch a clean-up of Pakistani politics. 'We have to start our clean-up job at the top, as a sort of political mafia controls the main parties. My Justice Movement is the only party which is untainted,' Khan said. Khan said he was not afraid of the Pakistan Army and he denied rumours he was the 'secret candidate of the generals.' 'I am nobody's puppet and I will make no compromises. Many politicians of the old style have already asked me link up with them and have also offered me money. I sent them all home,' Khan said. Khan also denied that he had accepted money from his Anglo-French millionaire father-in-law Sir James Goldsmith for his election campaign. 'It would be a scandal if I had accepted money from him. I married his daughter Jemima not for the money but for her money qualities,' Khan said. Speaking about the ongoing crisis in the Indian state of Kashmir, where a separatist rebel broke out in 1990, Khan demanded a referendum to solve the problem. 'Kashmiris must have the right to a choice,' said Khan.



US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright discusses the expansion of NATO Sunday in Washington, DC during NBC's Meet the Press. Albright, in her first TV appearance since becoming Secretary of State, discussed the status of US foreign policy around the world. — AFP/UNB photo

Police lift cordon Serbian students resume protest in Belgrade

BELGRADE, Jan 27: Thousands of pro-democracy student demonstrators swept triumphantly through central Belgrade early this morning after Serbian riot police lifted a cordon that had prevented them from marching for over a week, reports Reuter. 'This is our great victory... I feel glorious and victorious,' said student Djordjevic Podgorac. About 10,000 people marched through the streets before dawn, blowing whistles and chanting slogans. Hundreds of riot police, who set up the cordon along Kolarceva street in the city centre on January 19, withdrew at about 4 am (0300 GMT).

JKLF stage protest rally in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Jan 27: A Kashmiri militant group, Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), staged a demonstration near the Indian embassy here Sunday to mark India's Republic Day, reports AFP. Witnesses said a group of workers of the JKLF which is involved in a Muslim separatist campaign in the Indian-controlled southern two-thirds of Kashmir, marched up to the Indian embassy. Police guarded the mission and no incident was reported. In a statement handed over to the embassy the JKLF urged India to 'see reason and concede Kashmiris their right to determine their future.' The demonstrators, several of them wearing chains to symbolise alleged persecution in Indian-occupied Kashmir, chanted slogans in support of the JKLF demand for Kashmir's independence. Serb mob attacks Muslim refugees in front-line village. GAJEVI, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Jan 27: US peacekeepers Sunday rescued a group of Muslims who were attacked by a larger crowd of Bosnian Serbs as they tried to return to their frontline village, reports AP. Roughly 130 Bosnian Serb men, many carrying clubs and iron bars, drove the 30 Muslims out of the Serb-held hamlet of Gajevi, 25 kilometres (15 miles) northeast of Tuzla. 'We know that two people were injured, neither of them seriously,' said Sgt. Marianne Mirabella, a spokeswoman for the NATO-led peace force in Tuzla. She said more might have been wounded but did not report their injuries. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has given permission for some 175 Muslims to return to their prewar homes in the northern Bosnian village, which is in the Serb half of the divided country.

Chechens cast votes to elect president, parliament

GROZNY, Jan 27: Against a backdrop of war-shattered towns and villages, Chechens headed out to elect a president and a parliament Monday with all of the top candidates demanding independence from Russia, reports AP. Chechnya's separatists have been running the Muslim territory since the war with Russia ended in August, and many residents saw Monday's election as an important step toward a full separation from Moscow. 'This election is about our freedom,' said Hassan Khalidov, a former businessman who served as a rebel fighter in Chechnya's war against Russia. 'The Chechen people have waited hundreds of years for this. We are voting today without any pressure from outside. The polls opened at 7 am (0400 GMT) as the sun was rising in Grozny, which received a fresh coat of snow overnight. At the No 12 polling station in the bombed-out city centre, the facade of the three-story building was pocked with bullets and the top two floors were charred from a fire. Security was tight as Chechen soldiers with automatic rifles guarded the polling stations, but the atmosphere was relaxed and there were no reports of trouble early Monday. All the leading Chechen candidates are heroes of the guerrilla war who favour independence for the tiny territory in southern Russia that had only 1.2 million people before the war, and even fewer now. 'We don't want independence in five or 10 years,' Aslan Maskhadov, the front-runner in the presidential race, told a news conference Sunday. 'We think that after democratic elections, civilised elections, we need to sit down to talk with Russia' about independence. Moscow is little more than an observer in this election. But Russian leaders from President Boris Yeltsin on down are adamant that Chechnya is not to be allowed to secede, fearing that other ethnic groups in Russia might try to follow Chechnya's example. It was barely two years ago that Yeltsin sent troops and tanks pouring into Chechnya, expecting a swift rout of a lightly armed band of several thousand Chechen fighters. But the Russian forces struggled at every step, and when the Chechens caught them napping and retook Grozny last August, the Russians agreed to a peace deal and withdrew their last troops less than a month ago. The death toll for the Chechen war has been estimated at anywhere from 18,000 to almost 100,000, most of them civilians. By either count, it's the greatest loss of life among Russian or Soviet citizens in any conflict since World War II. The battle for Chechnya is now set to become a political struggle. Chechnya will have extensive autonomy and be allowed to run its own affairs, but any moves toward formal independence will face stiff resistance from Moscow. Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev has effectively served as Chechnya's leader in recent months. He took over the separatist cause last April after the Russian military killed Dzhokhar Dudayev, the man who first declared Chechen independence shortly before the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Yandarbiyev is among 16 men running for president, though he's believed to be trailing well behind Maskhadov, the former military chief of staff for the rebels, and Shamil Basayev, a fiery, 32-year-old guerrilla leader.

Maneka urges SC to ban licences for guns

NEW DELHI, Jan 27: India's best known environmentalist is asking the Supreme Court to ban licences for guns, which she claimed are being used for hunting instead of self defense, AP reports from New Delhi. The appeal came from Maneka Gandhi, a former environment minister and daughter-in-law of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was assassinated by her own bodyguards in 1984. In a speech Sunday in the southern city of Madras, Mrs. Gandhi said gun permits should not be given to individuals because they often are misused for hunting. Licences are issued by the police who must be convinced the weapon is needed for self defense. While the killing of most animals is outlawed, poaching is prevalent.

Mediator hints progress to end Lima hostage crisis

LIMA, Jan 27: A mediator in the hostage crisis said there is a 'small light on the horizon,' hinting at progress toward talks to end the takeover of the Japanese ambassador's residence, reports AP. As the crisis entered its sixth week Sunday, Roman Catholic Archbishop Juan Luis Cipriani said he hoped for movement in freeing the 72 hostages being held by Tupac Amaru rebels. The rebels have held the hostages since raiding a posh cocktail party Dec. 17. 'There is a small light on the horizon that we must take care of,' Cipriani said. 'God willing, these conversations could start soon.' Early Sunday, the rebels released police Gen. Jose Rivas Rodriguez, who was wheeled out on a stretcher from the compound accompanied by Cipriani and Red Cross officials.

UNP to oppose Chandrika's referendum plan for peace

COLOMBO, Jan 27: Sri Lanka's main opposition party will oppose a government plan for a referendum seeking approval for its peace proposals aimed at ending the 13-year ethnic war, a newspaper reported Monday, says AP. The government has indicated it would go directly to the people if it appears its peace plan will fall short of the required two-thirds majority in parliament. The government has only a single seat majority in the 225-seat legislature. The government hopes a referendum showing broad public approval would force the opposition United National Party to support the plan. But opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe told a public gathering in central Sri Lanka on Sunday that the proposed constitutional amendment should obtain a two-thirds parliamentary majority before a referendum, not after. 'The president can consult the people, but a referendum that is unconstitutional would be a non-binding referendum lacking legal significance,' he was quoted as saying by The Island newspaper. The plan calls for giving greater autonomy to the provinces, including the Tamil-dominated areas where Tamil rebels are seeking independence. The rebels have rejected the proposals. Hardline Sinhalese also have objected to them, fearing they could lead to a breakup of the country. The rebels are fighting for a homeland in the north and east, claiming that Tamils are discriminated against by the majority Sinhalese who control the government and military. More than 47,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka's civil war which began in 1983. Xinhua adds: The chief of staff of the navy Rear Admiral Cecil Tissera has been appointed the commander of the Sri Lanka Navy with effect from today, according to an official release from the Presidential Secretariat. The release said Tissera becomes the 13th commander of the Sri Lanka Navy and the first Navy commander to have been trained as an officer cadet at Sri Lanka's Naval and Maritime Academy in Trincomalee.

Govt, MILF agree to ceasefire

Muslim guerrillas yesterday agreed to a ceasefire to end week-long clashes in a southern town which have killed at least 40 people, a military official said, AP reports from Sultan Kudarat, Philippines. The truce will allow Buldon mayor Macarampat Manalao to return to office while the military and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) units involved in the clashes will maintain previous position, said army Major General Joselin Nazareno, who signed the ceasefire document.

Algerian media avoids violence news

Algerian news media published no reports of new violence Sunday a day after the government warned it would punish what it called journalistic exaggeration of the recent wave of terror, AP reports from Algiers. In a further sign the government is worried about the recent bloody attacks effects on its support among Algerians, the Interior Ministry Saturday threatened unspecified sanctions against media who 'play the game of terrorist propaganda.'

Fire destroys Jakarta shopping centre

A fire in central Jakarta Monday destroyed hundreds of shops in a four-storey shopping centre, AFP reports from Jakarta. Police said the fire started at around 5:30 am (2230 GMT Sunday) and the blaze continued seven hours later. A spokesman said the fire at the Harco Shopping Centre had spread to nearby offices and stores. There was no immediate word on casualties. Police aide Abdul Malik said the complex included hundreds of stores.

Suu Kyi gets US honorary university degree

WASHINGTON, Jan 27: Leading Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi received Sunday in absentia her first US honorary university degree given by the American university in honour of her fight for democracy and freedom, reports AFP. Aung San Suu Kyi could not be present to accept the honour because of the high likelihood she would be denied reentry to Myanmar by the country's military regime. Accepting the honour on her behalf was her husband Michael Aris, a British Tibet scholar at Oxford University. Aris read his wife's prepared commencement address to some 500 graduating students, their families and friends. 'You who are gathered here to celebrate the opening of doors of hope and opportunity might wish to assist our fight for a Myanmar where young people can know the joys of hope and opportunity,' she said in the address read by Aris. The dissident blasted multinational businesses' investment in Myanmar for shoring up the military regime. Dr Michael Aris, (L) husband of Myanmar political dissident Aung San Suu Kyi, holds the hood symbolising the honorary degree that Suu Kyi received at commencement ceremonies at American University in Washington, DC Sunday as he shakes hands with university President Dr. Benjamin Ladner. — AFP/UNB photo



Sudan claims 300 Ethiopian troops killed in fighting

KHARTOUM, Jan 27: Sudan said Sunday its troops killed more than 300 invading Ethiopian soldiers in fighting near the eastern border, but opposition officials denied the government had launched any such offensive, reports AP. A spokesman for the Sudanese opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which groups rebels from northern and southern Sudan, denied there had been any fighting with government forces 'in the past 48 hours.' The State-run Suna news agency reported that 'more than 300 Ethiopian troops, all Tigrayans were killed' in fighting on Sunday at Elias while Sudanese army troops were advancing towards the town of Quessan, which rebel forces captured earlier this month. The Tigrayans are the ruling ethnic group in Ethiopia. 'The fact that all the killed were Tigrayans stands as evidence that Ethiopian troops are intervening,' Suna said.

Off the Record

Good luck turns into bad luck

BANGKOK: A frightened male elephant gored a pregnant woman in the thigh while she was crawling under his belly for good luck. Thai police said Monday, reports Reuter. They said the jittery pachyderm attacked Wien Sudpleum, who is eight months pregnant, on Saturday as she was beginning her third trip under his belly. She was crawling under the elephant in the hope it would bring her luck and allow an easy delivery of her baby, said police in Phatum Thani, about 50 km (30 miles) north of Bangkok. Instead, she landed in hospital with a thigh injury after the elephant, frightened by barking dogs, gored her with his tusks. The mahout taking care of the elephant was arrested briefly and released after he agreed to pay 6,000 baht (240 dollar) compensation to the injured woman, police said. Many Thais believe if they crawl three times under the belly of an elephant, considered a noble animal, they will have good luck. Pregnant women also believe if they crawl under the elephant they will have an easier time with their delivery.

Keats' death mask in auction

LONDON: A death mask of the British 19th century poet John Keats, was auctioned here Wednesday for 16,100 pounds (25,700 dollars) at Christie's, the auction house announced, reports AP. The plaster mask, which is slightly scratched about the throat, is one of only four surviving copies of the cast made the day after Keats died on February 23, 1821 aged 26. He died in Rome where he had gone to try to cure his tuberculosis. The only person with him when he died was his friend Joseph Severn.

Relatives of immigrants have to wait longer to enter US

WASHINGTON, Jan 27: The spouses and dependent children of legal immigrants are having to wait longer to be admitted to the United States — fresh evidence of problems with the system, an immigration study panel says, reports AP. Most legal permanent residents now must wait a minimum of three years and 11 months to be reunited with immediate family members living abroad and seeking US immigration visas, according to State Department figures cited by the Commission on Immigration Reform. Just four months ago, the minimum wait was three years and eight months, and in September 1996 it was three years and one month, the commission reported recently. The wives, husbands and young children of people who have attained US citizenship are admitted into this country immediately. But more than 1.1 million spouses and offspring of legal permanent residents are on waiting lists, the figures show. At least 800,000 are relatives of illegal aliens who were given amnesty in 1986 — and are now here legally — and an unknown number may already be in the United States illegally. For immediate relatives waiting in Mexico, the wait is even longer: at least four years and eight months. 'Every year about 90,000 people apply and go to the back of that line,' said Susan Martin, the commission's executive director. 'We have an average of about 90,000 visas per year available for that category. The only other way you can get off that line is if the relative here naturalizes, and then you can jump to the top of the queue.' Many of the aliens who received amnesty a decade ago have become US citizens, but they are not naturalizing fast enough to eliminate the backlog, Martin believes. The commission believes the problem will not begin to ease for another decade. 'During the next 10 years we'll see continual increases in the wait time before it will start reducing. That's a long time to ask people to remain separated from their families,' Martin said. Republicans sought to reunify spouses and dependent children of immigrants more quickly in a bill debated in Congress last year. The legislation, pushed by Rep. Lamar Smith of Texas and former Sen. Alan Simpson of Wyoming, would have accomplished that by terminating programmes that allow Americans to sponsor their brothers and sisters and most adult children for entry into the United States. But the proposal failed after opponents said it would cut too deeply into the number of immigrants allowed to settle in this country. Some questioned the need to cut legal immigration at all. 'As matter of fact,' Kay said, 'in some cases we are aware of the wait for minor children being as long as 10 years, and that was not that long ago.'