

MQM expects to emerge with flying colours from Monday's polls

KARACHI, Feb 1: The ethnic-based Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), target of a crackdown during the rule of ousted Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto, is expected to emerge with flying colours from Monday's elections, reports AFP.

The MQM has held 51 National Assembly and 76 provincial assembly candidates country-wide in the coming elections.

"The kite will fly high in the skies," predicted MQM leader Farooq Sattar, referring to the party's official election symbol.

MQM claims to present millions of Muslim Urdu-speaking immigrants from India, a community which came to Pakistan after the partition of the sub-continent in 1947. They live in Karachi and other cities in southern Sindh province.

The party which boycotted polls for the Federal Assembly won by Benazir's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 1993, has been attracting large crowds to its campaign rallies for the coming ballot.

"It seems their electoral strength remains intact despite the difficult period they have been through," said Anwar Sen Roy, editor of the local daily Public.

The MQM was accused by

Benazir of committing terrorism and violence in Karachi during her three-year rule, which ended last November by presidential decree amid charges of corruption.

The ethnic-based party, which is generally considered the second major political force in Sindh after the PPP, accused her government of discrimination. The native majority in Sindh province speak Sindhi.

Altaf Hussain, who has been living abroad in self-imposed exile since 1992, leads the party from London, making daily telephone calls to his followers.

"Those who wanted to eliminate MQM in a four-year operation can see that it cannot be eliminated as it is a party of oppressed people with a cause," Hussain said recently.

With its stronghold in this city wracked by violence the MQM has survived both Benazir's reign in power from 1993 until her ouster and the rule of the previous Pakistani Muslim League (PML) government under Nawaz Sharif.

Both the PML and then the PPP launched campaigns against violence in Karachi, chiefly targeting the MQM. Unrest during the nearly five-year period led and estimated 2,000 people dead.

Taliban take control of Ghorband Valley

KABUL, Feb 1: Taliban religious fighters captured a strategic valley Friday, opening an important route from the Afghan capital to the country's northern region, reports AP.

Fighting was reported overnight in the Ghorband Valley. Taliban leader Abdul Wahid said 500 Taliban fighters chased about 50 soldiers under the command of northern warlord Rashid Dostum out of the valley.

Taliban soldiers were patrolling the Ghorband Valley Friday night. Shops were open and there were no signs there had been heavy fighting. "We captured this valley without any resistance," Wahid said.

Some residents of the Ghorband Valley reportedly joined the Taliban in fighting against Dostum's forces. The local population is largely Pashtun, the same ethnic group from which most of the Taliban fighters are drawn.

Beyond the Ghorband Valley lies Mazar-e-Sharif, a stronghold of the anti-Taliban alliance led by northern warlord Rashid Dostum and former military chief Ahmed Shah Massoud.

The Taliban army, which has imposed its version of strict Islamic rule in two-thirds of Afghanistan, has been trying to wrest the northern one-third from Dostum and former government soldiers.



Jemima Khan (C), wife of former cricket star-turned politician Imran Khan, sits under the flag of Khan's party "Tehrik-i-Insaaf" (movement for justice), as she addresses women supporters of her husband's political party during a women public meeting, in Lahore Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

Imran faces toughest contest in polls

LAHORE, Feb 1: Cricket hero Imran Khan, the man who led his country to World Cup fame in 1992, is facing his toughest Test yet, reports AP.

In his bid to succeed deposed Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, he has been hounded by reports of his playboy past and opponents' attempts to play up his wife's Jewish heritage in this Islamic country.

A British heiress has gone public with claims Khan fathered her 4-year-old daughter and threatened a paternity suit, making front page news in Pakistan.

In this conservative country, having a child out of wedlock is shocking. Denying one, as Khan has done, is unthinkable.

Khan, 42, does not deny he dated society women and frequented night clubs during his days as a world class cricket player and, before that, as a student at Oxford University. But since retiring from sports in 1992, he says, he's transformed himself into a devout Muslim.

He once vowed to marry a woman who observed Purdah, or life behind the veil. But in 1995, he married British heiress Jemima Goldsmith.

His political opponents have

attacked his wife, the daughter of English billionaire Sir James Goldsmith, for her Jewish heritage and charged that Khan's campaign is being funded by agents of Israel.

In Pakistan, where newspapers and politicians often blame disasters, bombings or misfortune on Israel, India or the United States, his wife's Jewish link has captured headlines.

Khan says that although his wife's ancestors were Jewish, she was Protestant — and converted to Islam to marry him. Khan insists scandal has not damaged him.

"As far as the people are concerned, it's a non-issue," he told The Associated Press. "The issue now in Pakistan is corruption... and we are the only party that can bring change."

His Justice Party has fielded candidates for most of the 217 parliamentary seats that will be up for grabs in Monday's election. If the party controls the National Assembly, its leader would become prime minister.

Some voters are willing to overlook questions about Khan's past and his wife, and embrace his pledge to clean up government. Khan has called

for the death penalty for corrupt officials.

Khalid Mahmood, a taxi driver in the capital, sees Khan as an alternative to Ms. Bhutto, who was dismissed November 5 on corruption charges, and to Nawaz Sharif, also previously in power and also dismissed on corruption charges.

"We have seen how Nawaz and Benazir let us down," Mahmood said. "So this time, I will vote for Imran."

But Ghuri Khan, who lives in rural Dera Ismael Khan in northern Pakistan, says Khan hails from the same elite background as other Pakistani leaders.

"He says he is against VIP (very important people) culture, but he arrives here to campaign in a helicopter and stays with the richest man in town," he said.

Khan has crosscrossed the country in his campaign, but recent surveys here predict his party will be lucky to win five seats.

"He can't expect to go straight from the cricket field to the (prime minister's) house," said Iqbal Memon, a shopkeeper from Khan's hometown in the eastern Punjab capital of Lahore.

Some reluctant to give up guns Liberian rebels line up to surrender weapons

MONROVIA, Liberia, Feb 1: Rebel fighters lined up to surrender weapons Friday, the deadline for nationwide disarmament. But some made clear they were reluctant to give up the guns that had been their livelihood for seven years, reports AP.

Questions remain over how successful the disarmament programme has been. By Friday afternoon the total number of demobilised fighters was estimated at about 17,000, far lower than the 60,000 fighters the United Nations estimates are in the country.

Peacekeeping officials said they would not give the final disarmament figure until Saturday.

The disarmament began in November under an accord signed last year by the country's six warlords to end Liberia's seven-year civil war. If it succeeds — and 13 previous ones have failed — elections for a new president will be held May 30.

Faction leaders recently have insisted the UN number

was far inflated and that the actual number of fighters is about 23,000. The commander of a multinational African peacekeeping force enforcing disarmament, Gen. Victor Malu, put the figure at about 35,000 and said he would be happy if half of them were demobilised by Friday.

After Friday, he has warned, peacekeepers will arrest anyone seen carrying weapons.

Several of those lined up Friday at a disarmament site in the capital, Monrovia, said they were not happy to be giving up the only way of life they ever had known.

"No, I want to keep it," 18-year-old Paul Mitchell of the Ulimo-J faction said as he prepared to surrender his AK-47 assault rifle. "I want revenge, but the government is forcing me to give it up."

Ulimo-J was at the centre of fighting from April to June that devastated the capital, killing at least 1,500 people and prompting the United States' military airlift of foreigners from the city.

20 arrested for links with dissidents Roads leading to Suu Kyi's home to remain closed: Junta

YANGON, Feb 1: The Myanmar government said today that roads leading to opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's home will remain closed for security reasons, reports Reuter.

The barricades are there for security reasons and the personal security of the lady, a government spokesman told reporters at a monthly news conference, when the situation improves, we will remove the barricades.

Access to Suu Kyi's lakeside home has been blocked since anti-government student unrest on the streets of Yangon in early December.

The Nobel peace laureate has said that she is unhappy with the restrictions Suu Kyi was unavailable to comment on the latest government statement.

The government spokesman also said that Myanmar universities and colleges closed after the December protests would remain closed until an appropriate time.

He also said the government had revealed a plot by a Thai-

land based exiled students movement to create disturbances in Myanmar and identified an American woman in Thailand as being involved.

AP adds: The military regime Saturday announced the arrest of about 20 people for alleged links between an insurgent group of student exiles and 'subversives' operating inside the country.

Col. Kyaw Thein, a senior military intelligence official, told reporters that about 20 people had been arrested for having links with the All Burma Students Democratic Front, an insurgency group.

The arrests fit a pattern of increasing crackdown on dissent. The front, based in Thailand, is composed of students who fled Myanmar after the army gunned down thousands of pro-democracy protesters during an uprising in 1988.

Kyaw Thein displayed a photograph of a US citizen, identified as Cynthia Cammert Fink, and accused her and a Western man of acting as couriers be-

tween the insurgents and groups within Myanmar. They were not among those arrested, officials said.

"Three subversive groups that have maintained contacts with the ABSDF insurgents abroad to carry out subversive activities, including the distribution of anti-government pamphlets, have been uncovered," Kyaw Thein said.

The government has accused the ABSDF, ethnic Karen rebels and communists of planting a bomb that killed five people December 25 at a pagoda compound where a Buddhist relic was on display.

The groups accuse the government of staging the bombing to justify a security crackdown in the wake of student demonstrations in December that were the biggest since 1988.

Since January 18, the government has sentenced 34 people to seven-year prison terms following secret trials for allegedly fomenting the unrest. Their names have not been disclosed.

UK cos capture 25pc of arms market

LONDON, Feb 1: Britain's defence industry captured one-quarter of the world arms market in 1996 with record sales totaling 5.1 billion pounds (8.16 billion dollars), second only to the US, the government said Friday, reports AFP.

Defence Procurement Minister James Arbuthnot termed the figure a "remarkable achievement for British industry," one that would boost the country's share of the world market to a record 25 per cent, up from 16 per cent in 1994 and 19 per cent in 1995.

However, the monetary increase between 1995 and 1996 was only about 100 million pounds (160 million dollars), the greater market share coming on a shrinking world market.

In addition, said the minister Middle East defence contracts representing potential sales of some three billion pounds (4.8 billion dollars) had already been signed.

The government's 1996 figure place Britain second in the world arms market after the United States, he said, adding that some 360,000 British jobs relied directly or indirectly on the defence industry.

Arbuthnot said a deal with

the United Arab Emirates had opened the door for companies including British Aerospace, GEC-Marconi and shipbuilder Vosper Thornycroft for potential sales totaling more than 2.5 billion pounds (4 billion dollars), he said.

And last November, Britain signed a 500 million pound (800 million dollar) arms deal with Qatar covering Ba Hawk trainer jets, GKN Piranha armoured vehicles, Vosper patrol boats and shorts starburst air defence missile systems.

ROK threatens to walk out of int'l deal on N-power plant

SEOUL, Feb 1: South Korea threatened Friday to walk out of an international agreement to build nuclear power plants for North Korea if the Communist North accepts nuclear waste from Taiwan, reports AFP.

Prime Minister Lee Soo-Sung told journalists here that the South Korean people "would find it hard to condone the export of Taiwanese nuclear waste to North Korea."

But Taipei defended a deal between its state-run Taiwan Power Co. (Taipower), and Pyongyang for the disposal of 60,000 barrels of nuclear waste over two years in the communist North, with a provision to increase the volume to 200,000 barrels.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Peter Cheng, speaking to a visiting delegation of South Korean anti-nuclear activists in Taipei, said the agreement with Pyongyang was purely a "business deal."

"There is no need to make excuses and find fault with us," he said, adding that Seoul "should send people there (North Korea) to inspect" nuclear waste disposal facilities if they were concerned.

Meanwhile South Korea today expressed disappointment at North Korea's postponement of a new wave of four-party peace talks, which had already been rescheduled for February 5.

Red Cross under fire for role in Lima crisis

LIMA, Peru, Feb 1: Red Cross workers have entered the Japanese ambassador's residence daily to deliver aid to hostages held there since December 17. Now the humanitarian organisation is being accused of taking on a new role: Interfering with the government's efforts to resolve the crisis, reports AP.

President Alberto Fujimori has hinted that he believes Red Cross workers are helping to protect the Tupac Katari rebels who stormed the house during a cocktail party, seizing more than 500 hostages.

The leftist guerrillas have released all but 72 of their captives, but are demanding that Peru free hundreds of fellow rebels from jail.

Fujimori refuses, and has tried to wear down the rebels. He has sent commandos on patrol around the residence. Police routinely blast military music through loudspeakers to disrupt the rebels' revolutionary chants.

The Red Cross angered some lawmakers and was criticised in the media when it complained that the police patrols were jeopardising its workers' safety.

The agency briefly suspended meal delivery to the residence on January 24 after armored personnel carriers drove over, white lines painted by Red Cross workers to mark a "safe zone" outside the residence.

"We don't want to impose rules, but we agreed to establish a humanitarian space to carry out our activities and that is not being respected," said Michel Minning, a former hostage and chief Red Cross representative.

In addition to overseeing aid to the hostages, Minning is a mediator in the crisis. That has drawn criticism that the Red Cross is too politically involved in efforts to end the standoff.

Fujimori seemed to endorse that view when he said aid workers should concentrate exclusively on helping hostages.



A Bosnian Croat policeman intervenes to stop a Croat civilian from throwing stones at two buses carrying 30 Muslims refugees who were attempting to return to the Herzegovian village of Stolac, some 35 kilometres east of Mostar, Friday. — AFP/UNB photo

20 near-misses over Delhi since Nov air collision

NEW DELHI, Feb 1: There have been 20 near-misses over India since the world's worst mid-air collision in November left 349 dead, aviation sources said today, reports AFP.

They said most of the near-misses occurred over the Indian capital. A Saudi Boeing 747 and a Kazakh airliner collided in the sky near the capital three months ago, leaving no survivors.

The sources said a Lufthansa passenger plane nearly collided with a military unmanned aircraft while crossing the Indian border into Pakistan. Its pilot rapidly gained altitude when he spotted the unidentified jet heading his way.

"The second airmiss between an Indian and an Indian Airlines plane occurred in the Calcutta-Dhaka sector while all the remaining near-disasters happened over New Delhi since November 12," an officials sources said.

Off the Record

Castors for corgi

LONDON: The queen mother's favourite Corgi which at 14 is the canine equivalent of a nonagenarian, has been provided with castors so he can accompany his mistress despite his failing hindlegs, the Sun reported on Saturday, says AFP.

Rather than have her put down, Queen Elizabeth the queen mother who herself is 96, has arranged for the dog's rump to be fitted with a frame with two small wheels.

Last year, the queen mother took to a wheel-chair to help her get around after undergoing hip surgery.

The Sun said rover, who is renowned among palace staff for his bad temper, was still getting used to the system. The paper said the main difficulty was preventing the device tipping over when it went round corners.

Ritual murder for treasure

NEW DELHI: Four men and a woman were arrested in Western India after they allegedly sacrificed a five-year-old girl in a bid to find hidden treasure, the United News of India (UNI) said, on Saturday, reports AFP.

The five murdered Ayeshabi Saudagar on January 26 near Aurangabad town, UNI said. The girl's body was found after villagers saw a dog carrying a human limb at a village devastated by an earthquake four years ago.

The assassins said they had been told they would discover treasure if they sacrificed a child.

Ritual murder of children is widespread in rural India. In the Eastern Indian Hills of Chotanagpur, tribes people try to abduct children each year, believing their blood, if sprinkled on fields, guarantees a good harvest.

BRIEFLY

Yeltsin turns 66: Boris Yeltsin turns 66 yesterday but persistent health worries leave him with little to celebrate. Reuter reports from Moscow.

Under pressure from political rivals to cede power or give it up altogether, Yeltsin is having trouble proving that he is fit to rule over Russia's 150 million people. Doctors say he is recovering from the pneumonia which struck three weeks ago. In early November he had a unipole heart bypass operation.

Road mishap claims 20 in China: Twenty people were killed and 12 seriously injured in a head-on collision between a bus and a truck in China's Henan province this week, China daily reported yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

The truck was heading the wrong direction on a highway lane in Bo'ai county when it crashed into the bus, which had 28 passengers on board, the report said. The number of transport accidents rises each year ahead of Chinese Lunar new year, when millions of people pack long-distance buses and trains beyond capacity to visit their home towns.

Tremor rocks Kathmandu: An earthquake rocked the Nepalese capital early Saturday morning, but no casualty or damage to property was immediately reported, AP reports from Kathmandu.

According to the National Seismological Centre the quake had a magnitude of 5.8. A quake of magnitude 4 can shake houses and buildings and cause hanging objects such as lamps to swing. The earthquake occurred at 1:47 am (1958 GMT Friday).

11 rioters held in Indonesia: Eleven Indonesians have been arrested on charges of looting and property destruction after Thursday's riot in a west Java town, newspapers reported yesterday. Reuter reports from Jakarta.

Police and military officers were not available for comment. Kompas newspaper quoted west Java military commander Major-General Tayo Tarnadi as saying on Friday the 11 people were arrested after the riot in Rengasdengklok. He declined to give further details.

'Zairean rebel forces capture strategic town of Watsa'

GOMA, Zaire, Feb 2: The leader of Zairean rebels holding much of the east of the country, Laurent-Desire Kabila, said Friday his forces had captured the strategic town of Watsa, 500 kilometres (300 miles) north of Goma, reports AFP.

But he added that foreign mercenaries were holding out near the airport.

"We took Watsa this morning," Kabila told AFP. "The town has been completely cleaner up... it was an important base for mercenaries, particularly South African."

He also said rebel forces, who have set up their own administration in north and south Kivu provinces bordering Rwanda, now were 30 kilometres (20 miles) from Kalemie, southeast of Goma.

Kalemie is a strategic port on Lake Tanganyika which has a rail link to the resource-rich Shaba province.

Watsa is at the centre of a very rich gold-bearing region close to the Sudanese and Ugandan borders. The town was seen as a bridge-head for the counter-offensive launched by the Zairean government to retake the land in rebel hands.

AP adds from Kinshasa: Three army Friday exhibited three prisoners it said had been arrested during fighting in eastern Zaire, including a Rwandan and a Ugandan soldier and a third

man identified as a doctor for an international aid group.

Seeking to bolster charges of cross-border incursions from neighbouring armies, Zairian Capt. Njoli Esende Ekeli said the prisoners represented "irrefutable proof of the... participation of Rwanda and Uganda in the war in the east of our country."

Esende said the three were among "many" rebels and foreign soldiers arrested in the past week during fighting in Nie Nie, near the eastern border with Uganda, and in the eastern city of Walkale. He gave no numbers but said many of the prisoners were badly wounded and receiving treatment in Kisangani, from where the Zaire army launched a counter-offensive last week.

Each of the men made brief comments to journalists, who were called to the Defence Ministry building to see them.

One man identified himself as Joseph Mupanganayi and said he was a doctor for the French-based aid agency Doctors Without Borders. Mupanganayi, whom Zaire has accused of spying, said he had been treating rebels as well as Zairian troops in the warzone when he was seized in Nie Nie. He denied being a spy.

A Rwandan army officer identified as Claude Alain Kalisa and wearing a plaster cast on one leg told reporters he had joined the rebels to prevent Zairian troops from teaming up with Hutu militants to attack his country.

TAIPEI, Feb 1: Taiwanese Premier Lien Chan vowed today to take more steps to promote the island's international standing, urging Beijing to face the reality that Taiwan is a sovereign state, reports AFP.

Lien also pledged to strengthen exchanges with Hong Kong after the former British colony reverts to Chinese rule on July 1, with the hopes of improving cross-strait relations.

"We must break the diplomatic isolation imposed by Beijing... we must not let the world listen to China's one-sided claims that Taiwan is part of its territory," Lien told a press conference.

"It might be difficult," he said, "but we urge the Chinese communists to treat Taiwan with peace, equality, reason and reciprocity."

"China must learn to face the reality that the two sides have been governed separately since 1949 and that we are a sovereign state," Lien said. Taiwanese President Lee Teng-Hsi, himself and other high-ranking officials would continue making overseas visits to boost the island's international profile despite Beijing's protests.

China has considered the island a renegade province since it drove nationalist forces

'Beijing urged to face reality of Taiwan as sovereign state'

here in 1949 at the end of a civil war.

AP adds: China accused Taiwan Saturday of "going too far down the path of independence" by planning to dismantle its provincial-level government.

'Turkey to retain its secular status'

ANKARA, Feb 1: Turkish President Suleyman Demirel said here today that Turkey would retain its secular status which had made it "the most developed Muslim country," Anatolia news agency reported, says AFP.

"Turkey as a secular state which affairs of state and those of religion are kept separate and where minds are free... have no fear, Turkey will stay that way," Demirel said in a speech to high school pupils.

Demirel said he was the "custodian of the secular republic," and added that Turkey owed its current level of development to the secular and democratic system founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

"The Turkish republic is the only secular state among 55 Muslim countries. It is also the one which has seen the most development during this century," he said.

The state-run Xinhua News Agency, quoting an unnamed spokesman for the Communist Party's Taiwan Affairs Office, said that "separatist forces" on the island is a province of China.

Divided since a civil war in 1949, the Communists on the mainland and the Nationalists on Taiwan have largely agreed that both sides will eventually reunify. The Nationalists maintained a separate provincial government for Taiwan to prop up the goal they would one day return to rule the mainland.

But nearly a decade of sweeping democratic change has caused many Taiwanese to question reunification, and in December the Nationalists proposed scrapping provincial institutions that overlap with the national government they run.

"This signals that the Taiwan authorities are further deviating from the 'One China' principle and refusing reunification," Xinhua quoted the Communist Party spokesman as saying.

The spokesman said the move would surely cause relations to deteriorate and confirmed suspicions Taiwan was "going too far down the path of independence."

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