

South Koreans show mixed reaction

Kim Dae-Jung new ROK president

SEOUL, Dec 19: South Korea's independent newspaper Hankyoreh and two television channels today said opposition Leader Kim Dae-Jung had won the presidential election, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, South Korea's president elect Kim Dae-Jung today proposed that Seoul and Pyongyang resume political, economic and military talks based on a 1992 inter-Korean basic agreement.

"I will pursue direct North-South dialogue," Kim said at his maiden press conference as president elect at the parliament building in Seoul.

Kim said he proposed the two rival Koreas resume face-to-face talks based on the 1992 agreement.

"If necessary I will meet with the Communist Party head Kim Jong-Il," he added.

South and North Korea earlier this month embarked on four-party peace talks in Geneva, with the United States and China in a support role.

AP adds: With a mixture of hope and worry, South Koreans welcomed a new president Friday, counting on him to lead them out of an economic crisis.

The man bearing that daunting responsibility is Kim Dae-Jung, 73, the veteran opposition leader chosen as president Thursday by a divided electorate that gave him only a 40 per cent plurality.

Through the campaign, Kim proved that he has the very basic qualification as a leader.

said Yoon Kun-young, an economics professor at Yonsei University.

"Yoon's optimism was shared by many South Koreans who fear they'll suffer from the terms of a record 57 billion dirr bailout of their economy by the International Monetary Fund earlier this month."

Others were more cautious. "I thought that Kim was the right choice for us now, but I am a little worried that his election was received negatively at the world markets," said Shin Yong-ho, a college student.

Kim came under fire during the campaign for demanding a renegotiation of some IMF conditions that could cost jobs. He retracted the demand after the nation's stock and currency markets plummeted.

News of Kim's election and continued concern about other Asian economies sent the New York Stock Exchange's benchmark index down more than 100 points Thursday.

"He may be an excellent politician but we don't see any experienced economists around Kim. That showed when Kim said he will renegotiate the IMF deal," said Chun Sang-kook, 36, a trading company worker.

Many Koreans view Kim's election as a boost for South Korea's fledgling democracy. Once a symbol of Korea's struggle for democracy against a succession of dictators, Kim spent many years in prison or under house arrest in the 1970s and 1980s.



South Korean president-elect Kim Dae-jung smiles and waves to supporters Friday, as he leaves for his home in Seoul after visiting his campaign headquarters. Kim defeated Lee Hoi-chang by a narrow margin to win the presidency. — AP/UNB photo

Tehran for opening dialogue with American people

TEHRAN, Dec 19: Continuing Iran's recent soft line toward the United States, Iran's foreign minister said Thursday that his government wants to open a dialogue with the American people to promote understanding between the two nations, reports AP.

Minister Kamal Kharrazi was apparently reinforcing the line taken by President Mohammad Khatami, who on Sunday called for a dialogue in the near future with the "great American people." It was the strongest signal of a rapprochement after nearly two decades of mutual hostility.

Kharrazi said in a round table discussion on state-run Tehran television that the American people needed to be introduced to Iran.

"The American people are not really political people. They are living their own lives," said Kharrazi. "We respect the American people and don't have a problem with them."

Kharrazi spent several years living in the United States as Iran's ambassador to the United Nations before he was appointed foreign minister this year.

"We can talk with the American people, have a dialogue with them and understand them. We can introduce our-

selves, which would be a victory and an advantage for us," said Kharrazi. He suggested that Khatami, a moderate cleric, would speak to the American people in a television address. But he did not say when that would be.

Khatami's comments were the first positive remarks about the United States from an Iranian leader since the 1979 Islamic revolution, which overthrew the Washington-backed shah. The United States severed ties with Iran after militants loyal to the revolutionary government stormed the US Embassy in Tehran and took 52 Americans hostage for 444 days.

US President Bill Clinton has said he welcomes a dialogue with Iran. But in Iran, any opening to the United States is opposed by a powerful hard-line faction opposed to Khatami.

"There are no grounds for the improvement of relations with the United States," the daily Jomhuri Islami, the mouthpiece of the hard-liners, said Wednesday. It said that "the United States remain the No. 1 enemy of the Iranian nation."

Previously, hard-liners have branded anybody calling for better relations with the United States as a traitor.

Off the Record

Clowns good for child cancer patients?

LONDON: Clowns who play tricks on doctors and dance down hospital corridors can help sick children to come to terms with cancer. The Lancet, a medical journal, reported Friday, says Reuter.

Dr Daniel Oppenheim of Institute Gustave Roussy in France said role-playing games and magic tricks by clowns helped children to feel at home in the intimidating atmosphere of a hospital.

"They are trained to assess the medical history, social situation and emotional needs of each patient," Oppenheim said of the clowns who have been working in nine French hospitals since 1991.

Cleaners might find a Congo line of clowns and red-nosed children, dragging their intravenous trolleys and dancing the Samba behind," Oppenheim and colleague wrote in The Lancet.

"Playing roles helps children to break away from a rigid self-image and a stiff relationship with the healthcare team," The Lancet said.

Using props such as whistles made from syringes and telephones made from stethoscopes, clowns can dance, squirt water, play music, tell stories and play tricks on doctors, it said.

They can also build up a relationship with each child and can be present at medical examinations and accompany them to the operating theatre.

Epilepsy-causing cartoon!

BANGKOK: Thai Public Health Minister Rakkiat Sukthana said yesterday he would call for a government ban on imports of the Japanese hit cartoon "Pokemon" that caused epilepsy-like convulsions and seizures among children, reports Reuter.

More than 700 viewers of a "Pokemon" episode on Japanese television developed seizures while watching bright flashing lights on the cartoon on Tuesday and were rushed to hospitals. Japanese cartoons, dubbed in Thai, are popular among Thai children.

Rakkiat told reporters about 50,000 people suffer from epilepsy in Thailand. Epileptics are the people most vulnerable to complications from watching the cartoon show, a Japanese version of the video game "Pocket Monsters," he said.

Suratit Techatuwanon, Deputy Director of Bangkok's Rajvithi Hospital, said many Thai children were addicted to Japanese cartoons and said those with a history of epilepsy would likely react to shows featuring vividly coloured explosions mixed with strobe-light flashing of a character's eyes.

Bodo rebels shoot dead 4 in Assam

GUWAHATI, India, Dec 19: Separatist guerrillas of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) shot dead four people and wounded two in India's north eastern state of Assam, police officials said today, reports Reuter.

Police said the guerrillas attacked the non-tribal north Indian labourers late on Thursday in Barpetta district, 170 km (106 miles) west of Guwahati, the state capital.

The attackers had demanded money from the labourers before opening fire, police said.

Border guards trade gunfire on Kashmir frontier

JAMMU, India, Dec 19: Indian and Pakistani border guards fought pitched gunbattles on their disputed Kashmir frontier but there have been no casualties, officials said today, reports AFP.

The firing between the paramilitary Pakistan Rangers and the Border Security Force (BSF) of India began overnight Thursday and raged through the night. BSF officials said in this winter capital of Kashmir.

"Intermittent firing is going on even now," a BSF official told AFP. "But there have been no casualties."

Cloning of Dolly chosen best science event of 1997

WASHINGTON, Dec 19: Dolly, a cloned sheep that set off an international debate on the promise and perils of genetic manipulation, was selected by editors of a leading journal as this year's most significant accomplishment in science, reports AP.

Dolly's cloning from the cell of an adult sheep "electrified both the research community and the general public," said editors of Science, a prominent publication that features general scientific research.

Although animals had been cloned before, creating a sheep from a single cell of a 6-year-old ewe was a stunning technological feat that many had thought impossible," the journal said.

Researchers at the Roslin Institute in Scotland announced the cloning last February, when the sheep was seven months old. The famed animal continues to thrive, said Dr. Ian Wilmut, leader of the Roslin research team.

Hamas offers Israel peace in exchange for WB, Gaza

TEL AVIV, Dec 19: The spiritual leader of the Hamas militant group Thursday offered Israel peace in exchange for the West Bank and Gaza, reports AP.

Sheikh Ahmed Yassin told Channel 2 TV that the areas, which Israel seized in the 1967 war, "are occupied territories. The whole world says they are occupied territories. I say remove the occupation and let's make peace."

The Islamic fundamentalist group has opposed peacemaking with Israel and has bedeviled Israel-PLO talks that began in 1993 with bombings that killed some 200 Israelis and contributed to the election of Israel's hardline Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Yassin has in the past occasionally condemned the terrorist attacks — but this was his clearest peace offer to date. It suggested he may be falling in line with Yasser Arafat's policy of striving for a territorial accommodation with Israel.

"When the occupation will end, and the people will return to their homeland there will be peace," he said. "But as long as...

the occupation weighs heavy on my heart, where is peace?"

Israeli reaction to the statement was not immediately available.

Yassin spent eight years in Israeli prison for ordering the killing of Palestinian collaborators with Israel. He was released in September in a swap for two Mossad agents captured in a botched assassination attempt of a Hamas leader in Jordan.

The quadriplegic cleric said that if Israel wanted peace it would accept his offer. "But you don't want it," he said.

The previous Israeli government appeared willing to allow a Palestinian state in most of the West Bank and Gaza.

Netanyahu has softened his stance and his Cabinet is debating alternative peace offers — but the most generous would still retain half the West Bank for Israel. He also still opposes Palestinian statehood and any compromise over Jerusalem.

Meanwhile in a departure from the current atmosphere of acrimony, a top Palestinian official said Thursday that he envisions Jerusalem as a shared capital at the heart of a European-style union of Israel and the Arab states.

"Without building a unified Middle East or a union here in the Middle East, we will not be able to enter the next century in a decent way," Faisal Hussein said in a speech to the Jewish Media Conference.

Hussein's statement was a rare endorsement by a Palestinian leader of an integrated Middle East where Israel is not reluctantly accepted, but also embraced.

At the same time, his vision of a union of states on equal footing addressed fears by some Arabs that in a future, peaceful Middle East, Israel might dominate the region economically.

Hussein's concept paralleled the vision outlined by former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres in his book 1993 "The New Middle East" — which was criticized by many as utopian and unrealistic.

Since the conservative Benjamin Netanyahu was elected prime minister in May 1996, the idealism has been replaced by more strident and nationalist tones on both sides.



President Clinton, with the help of First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, reads "Twas the Night Before Christmas" to Washington-area children, Thursday, in the East Room of the White House. Jelani Irby, a second-grader from Washington's Brightwood Elementary School, right, and Jose Iraheta, a second-grader at Washington's Bankcroft Elementary School look on. — AP/UNB photo

Security forces gun down five LTTE men

COLOMBO, Dec 19: Security forces shot dead five Tamil Tiger guerrillas during a search operation in northern Sri Lanka, the Defence Ministry said today, reports AFP.

Troops confronted members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) hiding in an underground bunker in the Jaffna Peninsula on Thursday, the ministry said, adding that two soldiers were wounded.

The ministry reported an identical incident in the same area five days ago when it claimed killing five more rebels.

There was no immediate word from the LTTE about the Defence Ministry claims.

The ministry said security forces were also keeping up "small group operations" in the north where the military is conducting a major offensive to capture a key highway from the Tiger guerrillas.

Two weeks ago the Tigers mounted a fierce counter-attack that left hundreds dead on both sides, however, since then, there have been no major confrontations.

The government has said it hopes to complete operation "sure victory" and open the

highway before the country marks 50 years of independence on February 4.

Official figures show about 1,000 soldiers have been killed and another 3,000 wounded in the fighting since May 13, the Defence Ministry has said more than two-thirds of the 76 kilometre (45 mile) highway have been captured so far.

Russia to build N-power station in India

NEW DELHI, Dec 19: Russian President Boris Yeltsin will sign a long-delayed agreement to build a nuclear power station in southern India when he visits the country next month, Indian and Russian officials said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

Indian Finance Minister P Chidambaram told reporters that the project had been discussed on the sidelines of a two-day meeting of the Indo-Russian joint commission.

As co-chairman they (officials) have reported to us that they have resolved all the issues," Chidambaram said.

France affirms support for UN war crimes tribunal

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 19: France's UN ambassador told the Security Council on Thursday that his government was "deeply shocked" by claims that French troops were not cooperating with a UN court to arrest alleged war criminals in Bosnia-Herzegovina, reports AP.

"France was deeply shocked by recent statements in the press questioning the conduct of states participating in the (NATO-led) mission," Ambassador Alain Dejammet said during a debate on the situation in Bosnia.

"French officers follow those directives set jointly by the allies and strictly apply the rules of engagement laid down by NATO on the apprehension of indicted war criminals sought by the tribunal," Dejammet said.

Dejammet's remarks were part of a war of words which erupted this month between the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, Netherlands, and the French government.

Early this month, French Defense Minister Alain Richard called the tribunal a "stage show justice" and indicated he would not permit French military officers to testify before the court.

Following Richard's comments, the Canadian chief prosecutor, Louise Arbour, said French forces serving in the former Yugoslavia have refused to testify or arrest suspected war criminals.

She told the French daily Le Monde that in light of cooperation by British, American, German and Canadian troops, the French falling seen at every level, is rather remarkable.

The vast majority of the guilty... are in the French sector of the Bosnian territory patrolled by French, US and British peacekeeping forces, Arbour said. "There are opportunities for considerable action in the French sector. But we face total inertia."

She accused the French Defence Ministry of trying "to control the tribunal's access to the truth."

In his speech, Dejammet noted the contribution France had made to the UN peacekeeping force in the former Yugoslavia. He said 17 French soldiers had lost their lives and 700 were wounded.

Dejammet said the primary responsibility for handing over indicted war criminals rests "with the (Yugoslav) parties themselves."

Cambodian polls rescheduled

PHNOM PENH, Dec 19: After weeks of frenzied discussion and back-room dealing, Cambodia's parliament agreed today to delay next year's much-anticipated national election for two months, setting the polling date for July 26, reports AFP.

The assembly voted 73 to 13 for the new date after the proposal from Co-Interior Minister Sar Kheng, who is overseeing election preparations, calling the original May 23 date unfeasible for technical reasons.

"July 26 is the right date for the election," he said, noting that it would allow time for all preparations, including voter registration, to be completed and not run foul of the current parliament's five-year mandate.

MPs agreed today that their mandate ends on September 24 — the five-year anniversary of the promulgation of the new constitution.

El Nino phenomenon blamed for tropical floods, drought in 1997

JAKARTA, Dec 19: Planet Earth was battered by floods, drought and fire in 1997, a year which ended with the world's major polluters squabbling over ways to prevent further environmental disaster, reports Reuters.

The 160 nations attending a UN conference on global warming, billed as one of the most vital ever held, finally reached a consensus on cutting greenhouse gas emissions through the next decade.

The climate was dominated in the later part of the year by El Nino, an upswelling of warmer water off the South American coast which affects global weather patterns.

"I think for sure the most dramatic thing has been the El Nino phenomenon that has been experienced throughout the tropics," said Jeffrey Sayer, Director-General of the International Centre for Forestry Research (CIFOR), at Bogor near Jakarta.

El Nino, called by Peruvian fishermen after the Christ Child because of its appearance around Christmas, is being blamed for widespread floods and drought in the tropics, and has affected other areas as well. A major manifestation of the phenomenon was drought-aggravated bush fires in Indonesia that spread a choking smog across large areas of southeast Asia before badly-delayed monsoon rains started to fall in late November.

Floods swept arid Somalia in East Africa, while the rain forests of Indonesia's Irian Jaya dried out and hundreds of tribespeople died from starvation and disease.

Apart from El Nino eastern and central Europe suffered the worst floods in living memory in early July with over 100 people killed in Poland and the Czech Republic, and many thousands of families displaced through the region and eastern

Germany. Meanwhile, in the ancient Japanese capital of Kyoto, a UN gathering of 159 countries finally agreed on cutting greenhouse gas emissions after 11 days of frantic negotiations which in the later stages pitted the world's two biggest polluters, the United States and China, in acrimonious debate.

"Perhaps this day will be in the future remembered as the day of the atmosphere," conference chairman Raul Estrada told the conference after a treaty text was passed by consensus on December 11.

The conference agreed that developed nations should cut emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases blamed for global warming.

The United States accepted a seven per cent cut from 1990 levels by 2008-2012, the European Union eight per cent and Japan six per cent.

The conference accepted scientific evidence that heating of the earth's surface by gases trapped in the atmosphere causes more and fiercer storms, expanding deserts, melting polar ice and raising sea levels which threaten to submerge low-lying islands — and some island states, such as the Maldives in the Indian Ocean.

The United States wants developing countries brought under the emission control umbrella and the treaty still faces a major hurdle in its passage in Washington through a potentially hostile Republican Congress.

US Vice President Al Gore called the Kyoto agreement, "a vital turning point," but echoed the EU's Environment Minister Ritt Bjerregaard that more still needed to be done.

"This is not good enough for the future. We would like the parties to be more ambitious," Bjerregaard said.

Indonesia's Environment Minister Sarwono Kusumaatmadja, in an interview with Reuters, said it was up to the developed countries to provide the leadership to guarantee earth's future.

The Kyoto conference would at least provide a greater awareness of environmental problems, particularly as it took place in an El Nino year.

"But there is always a time lag between awareness and action, and I think that the time lag can be very long," he said.

The Kyoto conference also pitted big business against campaigners for the environment — although major insurance organisations did offer support to the "greens".

CIFOR's Sayer told Reuters that a major development in the last two or three years was the emergence of major multinational corporations in the global timber industry.

"This is not necessarily a bad thing because those companies also have the resources to

practise sustainable forestry if they are motivated to do so.

"But there is quite a bit of concern that they tend to go to countries where the regulations are least strict, where the profits can be made easily and where governments are the most susceptible to pressure to allow them to exploit forests in an abusive way," he said.

Environmental experts agree that perhaps the key issue of the future is water itself.

Despite various other problems afflicting the environment, "it is still water which is the main problem," said JW Taco Botema, a programme leader with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

All the mega cities of Asia are in the process of giving households access to piped water supplies like one has in Europe and in the main cities in the temperate zones," he said.

Commission report Eight states ratify CTBT so far

VIENNA, Dec 19: Eight states have so far ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), outlawing nuclear blasts, and 149 have signed it. The CTBT preparatory commission said here Thursday, reports AFP.

The treaty was adopted by UN General Assembly in September last year, and has been signed by the five powers that have officially admitted having nuclear weaponry — Britain, France, China, Russia and the United States.

But 44 states possessing nuclear installations must ratify the pact before it becomes binding.

Those which have ratified it so far are the Czech Republic, Fiji, Japan, Micronesia, Mongolia, Peru, Qatar and Uzbekistan.