

International

CPI rejects Congress' appeal to join hands against BJP

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: Indian Communists, who could play a key role as powerbrokers in the country's upcoming elections, today rejected appeals from the once-dominant Congress Party to join force against the Hindu nationalists, reports AFP.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) said they would battle it out against both the Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party), the country's largest two parties, in the February-March polls.

The snub came after a Congress leader Friday said the Communists would have to abandon their "anti-Congressism" if they wanted to defeat the right wing BJP, accused by critics of sectarianism and of championing divisive religious policies.

CPI general secretary AB Bardhan, however, said: "There is nothing like blind anti-Congressism, which we are often accused of. It is with open eyes we are critical of the Congress policies and their corruption."

"We have always considered the BJP as a rank rightist, communal and reactionary force. We consider them dangerous. We will try to prevent them from taking power. But that does not mean we will spare the Congress."

The BJP, seen as pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim by its critics, overtook the Congress as India's largest parliamentary party last year.

Both are hoping to come to power at the head of coalitions after the polls, which are expected to produce a hung parliament.

India's population of 960 million includes around 125 million Muslims.

India's outgoing United Front minority coalition government, made up of more than a dozen parties including the Communists, is expected to be third force in the polls.

The front collapsed in November when the Congress, after backing it following 1996 elections to keep the BJP out of power, withdrew its support.

The Congress appeal to the Communists, who are influential in three of India's 25 states, was part of its attempt to form an anti-BJP nationwide coalition.

The CPI and the more influential Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) claimed around 50 of the 545 seats in the last parliament.

They played a key role in launching the United Front centre-left coalition that took office in June 1996 after those elections produced a hung parliament.

Analysts say the Communists could again play a crucial role if the upcoming polls lead to another split verdict.

EC urged to shorten duration of polls

Meanwhile, Indian political parties eager to end dragging political uncertainty, have urged the poll panel to shorten the duration of coming elections now staggered over three weeks, newspapers said today.

The autonomous Election

Commission has been besieged with requests from political leaders to cut short the voting schedule that is to start February 16 and end on March 7, the Hindu and other dailies said.

He counting of the millions of votes was to begin nationwide on March 8, and all results were expected to be known by March 12.

Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's Janata Dal (People's Party) said the schedule was unusually long.

It could increase the chance of tinkering with ballot boxes and other types of manipulation, it added.

The Janata Dal said its views had the support of its Communist allies.

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), said it also wanted the polling duration to be reduced.

The present programme is unduly staggered, said the BJP's Jana Krishnamurthy. "It would be good if the Election Commission had condensed it within 10 days or a week."

Mexico massacre Top official indicted for killing

TUXTLA GUTIERREZ, Mexico, Jan 3: The top official in the Mexican county where 45 people were massacred has been indicted on charges that he organised the killings, reports AP.

Jacinto Arias Cruz, the head of Chenalho country in southern Chiapas state, will not be eligible for bail due to the seriousness of the crimes he is charged with, prosecutors said Friday.

According to several witnesses, Jacinto Arias Cruz supplied weapons to those accused in the December 22 massacre, said Roberto Villarreal, spokesman for the Attorney General's Office.

Arias Cruz has denied responsibility for the massacre, but refuses to speak with the press, according to prison officials. A supporter of Mexico's ruling party, he is charged with causing injuries, criminal association and illegal weapons possession.

Castro makes surprise visit to US ship

HAVANA, Jan 3: Cuban President Fidel Castro on Friday paid a surprise visit to a US oceanography ship, making an unusual trip to the communist-ruled Caribbean island, reports Reuters.

The R V Seward Johnson, an oceanography exploration vessel registered in Fort Pierce, Fla, was moored at a protocol dock in Havana Port directly in front of Cuban navy headquarters, it flew the US flag at its stern and the Cuban flag as a courtesy to the host port.

Powerful deck lights lit up the ship, which carries a mini-submarine and other modern underwater exploration equipment, during the evening visit by the Cuban leader, the black mercedes in which he usually travels with an armed escort was parked alongside the ship.

Presidential guards dressed in olive-green uniforms and carrying sub-machine guns were positioned around the vessel. A plainclothes security guard confirmed that Castro was on board visiting the vessel.

Mir astronauts fix computer component

MOSCOW, Jan 3: Cosmonauts have replaced a faulty component of the Mir space station's main computer which broke down early on Friday, the Space Flight Ground Control Centre (TSOUP) said overnight.

ITAR-Tass reported, says AFP. The breakdown had caused the orbital station's solar panels to swing away from the sun, thereby disrupting its energy supplies. But Interfax, citing TSOUP, reported earlier that manoeuvres had begun to correct Mir's orientation using small auxiliary thrusters on the Soyuz TM 26 cargo vessel.

It said the thrusters had been ignited at 1915 GMT.

TSOUP said that at no time had the breakdown jeopardised the security of the three men aboard the station, Russian Anatoly Solovoyov and Pavel Vinogradov and American David Wolf.

UK minister still opposed to decriminalising cannabis

LONDON, Jan 3: Britain's Interior Minister Jack Straw, fighting back a father's heartache after his teenage son was accused of selling drugs, said he is still implacably opposed to decriminalising cannabis, reports Reuters.

"What it has done is strengthen the convictions I've held before - that drugs should not be legalised," the home secretary said after his name was finally made public on Friday after a nine-day legal farce.

Straw's 17-year-old son William is alleged to have sold a small quantity of cannabis for 10 pounds (£16.46 dollar) to a reporter from a tabloid newspaper, he could still face charges but may be let off with a police caution.

Tarar's election may strengthen hands of Pak fundamentalists

LAHORE, Jan 3: The election of Pakistan's most conservative president in a decade is the latest sign of the strengthening influence of religious fundamentalism in this Muslim country, reports AP.

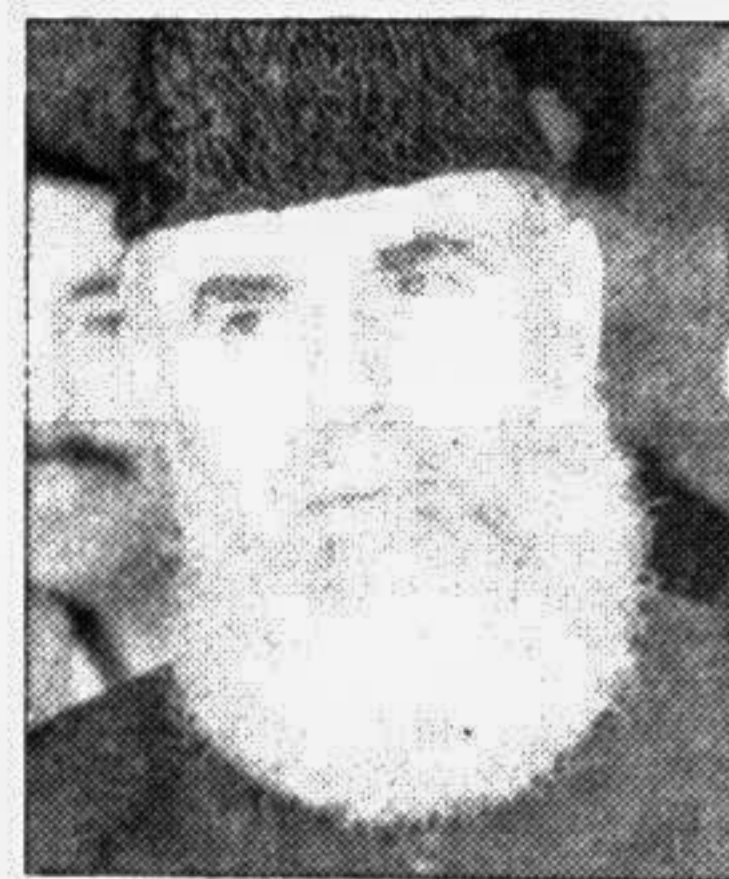
In a mosque in Lahore, a young boy says his big ambition in life is to kill non-believers. His friend says he wants to fight a "jihad," or holy war.

In the nearby village of Ralwind, hundreds of bearded men carrying bed rolls arrive at a religious school to learn more about their Islamic faith before heading off to preach in Pakistan and abroad.

Here, in Punjab province, where 60 per cent of Pakistan's 140 million people live, segregation of the sexes is gaining momentum.

Television advertisements of pretty young women using facial soap have been pulled, not for what they show, but for what they don't. As one government censor put it: "People may imagine that she is not wearing anything."

Now, Rafiq Tarar, who was elected by legislators Wednesday, is taking office as the coun-



Mohammad Rafiq Tarar

try's most religiously orthodox president since military dictator Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq died in 1988.

Zia resurrected public hangings, stoning to death and public beatings, all in keeping with Islamic dictates.

Tarar, a retired judge of the Lahore High Court, is a member of Pakistan's orthodox Muslim Tableeghi movement, which is committed to spreading Islam

worldwide. Religious leaders welcomed Tarar's election. Liberals and human-rights activists expressed worries.

Tarar told The Associated Press in a telephone interview that Pakistan's liberals have nothing to fear from him and described himself as a "liberal Muslim."

His critics question that description.

Tarar opposes family law legislation that gives women the right to divorce and to fight for custody of their children. The three-judge court he led upheld amputation of limbs as punishment for theft, although Pakistani physicians have refused to carry out such sentences.

He also has condemned the promotion of members of Pakistan's minority Ahmadi community to senior government jobs and judicial posts.

Many liberals also believe Tarar's election is a devastating setback for campaigns against laws they view as repressive or anti-women.

BRIEFLY



Former drug czar Lee Brown, right, is sworn in as mayor of Houston by US District Judge Vanessa Gilmore Friday in Houston. Brown is the first African-American mayor of Houston.

Turkey detains 20 Pakistanis:

Turkish authorities on Friday detained 20 illegal Pakistani immigrants seeking to flee western Turkey for a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, security officials said, AFP reports from Ankara.

The refugees were detained in the town of Seferihisar near Turkey's main Aegean port of Izmir as they were preparing to sail to Greece, they said. The report came amid an ongoing influx of thousands of mainly Kurdish refugees from Turkey to Italy.

US balloon launch to be delayed: An impending storm has forced two men to delay for 24 hours their attempt at an around-the-world balloon flight, AP reports from Albuquerque.

Pilot Dick Rutan of Mojave, California and co-pilot Dave DeLong of Espanola, New Mexico, now plan to take off early Tuesday. Forecasters are predicting rain and strong winds up to eight knots Monday in Albuquerque. Balloonists generally wait to launch in winds under five knots, said Patrick Barry, spokesman for the Global Hilton team.

Gas fumes kill 4 of a Pak family:

Four members of a family were asphyxiated while they slept after leaving a gas heater on, police said Saturday, AP reports from Lahore.

Matloob Hussain, his wife, daughter and elderly uncle died Friday when gas fumes filled their home in Mohra Rajputan, a mountainous area 6 kilometres (10 miles) northeast of the federal capital of Islamabad in the Punjab province. Neighbours entered the home when no one emerged by midday and discovered the bodies, police said. Hussain's 14-year-old daughter, the sole survivor, is recovering at a nearby hospital, police said.

Train mishap kills 8 in India:

Eight people were killed when a speeding passenger train rammed into a jeep in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, The Hindustan Times newspaper reported yesterday, AFP says from New Delhi. Four others were injured in the accident near Champaran town, the daily said. The jeep was crossing a railway line when it was hit by the train that was coming from close to the Nepal border.

2 Filipino crew members missing:

Rescuers searched Friday for two missing Filipino crew members of cargo ship that exploded and caught fire north of Argentina's capital, AP reports from Buenos Aires.

The tanker exploded late Thursday night on the Parana River, injuring 31 crew members, the coast guard said. The reason for the explosion was not immediately clear. The tanker, "Lancer" registered in the Bahamas, was en route from the Buenos Aires province port of Campana to Houston, Texas, via Venezuela. Two of the crew were in serious condition, the coast guard said. The nationalities of all the crew were not immediately available, although the majority were believed to be from the Bahamas, Greece and the Philippines.

Strong quake hits Tokyo:

A fairly strong earthquake hit the main northern Japanese island of Hokkaido yesterday but caused no damage or injuries, the Meteorological Agency said, Reuters reports from Tokyo.

The quake, strong enough to knock items off shelves measured 5.3 on the Richter Scale and was most intense in the town of Nakashibetsu, about 1,700 km (1,055 miles) northeast of Tokyo, it said.

4 killed in Venezuela jails:

One inmate died in violence that broke out early Friday in La Planta prison and three others were killed Thursday in fighting in a jail 30 kilometres (19 miles) away, officials said, AFP reports from Caracas.

Rodolfo Marciano was fatally shot in the chest in the La Planta prison in the southwest of the capital, a national guard official said. Police cordoned off the prison and conducted a search of Cellblock Four, the most violent unit of the capital's beleaguered prison system, where inmates were digging a two-metre-wide (two-year-wide) tunnel.

21 Japanese choked to death so far:

A total of 21 Japanese choked to death on the first two days of the New Year in Tokyo after eating traditional glutinous "mochi" rice cakes in the belief the food brings longevity, a report said yesterday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Of the 21 victims, 18 were aged 65 years or older, according to police and ambulance squad reports compiled by the mass-circulation daily Yomiuri Shimbun early Saturday. Official nationwide figures were unavailable although the Tokyo fire department said eight people died of suffocation after eating mochi or "ozoni" soup containing the traditional food.

Grenade attack on UN HQs in Baghdad

BAGHDAD, Jan 3: Two rocket-propelled grenades have been fired at the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad but there were no reports of casualties, a UN official in Iraq said today.

"There has been a problem some explosions were heard late last night," UN coordinator in Iraq Denis Halliday told Reuters.

He described the attack as "potentially dangerous" but gave no other detail.

An Iraqi culture and information ministry spokesman blamed the attack on a "group

Rabbani in Iran for talks

TEHRAN, Jan 3: The former president of Afghanistan, Burhanuddin Rabbani, is in Tehran for talks with Iranian officials on the search for peace in his war-torn country, Afghan officials said here, reports AP.

Before coming to Tehran on Friday, Rabbani had visited Pakistan where he met with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and a US government envoy, they said.

His visit here will involve political consultations with the Iranian authorities to ways to reach peace in Afghanistan.

which does not like relations between Iraq and the UN Security Council to be stable."

"The same people who are responsible for disturbing relations between Iraq and the Security Council are again responsible for this attack," the spokesman said.

He said the incident was under investigation.

The UN headquarters in Baghdad accommodates the office of the UN humanitarian coordinator in Iraq and the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) in charge of dismantling Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

Iraq and UNSCOM are locked in a standoff over inspections of "presidential sites" which Baghdad has declared off-limits to UN inspectors.

Cable News Network (CNN) television said the attack occurred late on Friday night but both grenades were without explosives and did not cause much damage.

"One of the grenades went through a window in the headquarters' cafeteria. It caused some damage inside but the cafeteria was closed at the time so nobody was hurt," the television said.

CNN said the building was guarded 24 hours a day by both Iraqi security men and UN guards.

Myanmar to have democratic govt in near future: Suu Kyi

BANGKOK, Jan 3: Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi has predicted Myanmar would enjoy a democratically elected government in the "not too distant future" and called for greater human rights during the country's 50th year of independence, a release said Saturday, reports AP.

Myanmar, on Sunday celebrates the end of British colonial rule. The independence struggle was led by Suu Kyi's father, Aung San.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner linked the event with the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and criticised those who

rejected democracy and human rights as inappropriate Western imports.

"Myanmar was one of the original signatories (of the declaration) and I'm not aware that any Burmese at the time stood up and said, 'this is not Asian, this is not Burmese,'" she said.

Suu Kyi, a staunch opponent of Myanmar's ruling military, recalled that Myanmar passed through a period of democracy following independence.

"These were the years Myanmar was considered one of the nations most likely to succeed in Asia. I think democracy did us a lot of good," she said.

Ranariddh's return from exile denounced

PHNOM PENH, Jan 3: Radio broadcasts believed to have been orchestrated by the ruling party Saturday denounced a planned return from exile this month of ousted First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh, reports AP.

Radio messages from several organisations, including student and women's groups, also slammed a proposal by King Norodom Sihanouk to grant an immediate pardon to his deposed son if he is convicted of criminal charges.

Ranariddh has been in exile since he was deposed by Second Prime Minister Hun Sen in a violent coup d'etat in July. Hun

Sen has threatened to put him on trial should he return to participate in general elections scheduled for July.

The broadcasts, widely believed to have been engineered by Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party, followed an announcement that Ranariddh would return to Cambodia mid-month or later.

The prince's personal representative Lu Layreng said Friday that rather than a January 15 arrival, Ranariddh might time his return to coincide with the visits of two top envoys from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.



Firefighters watch a fire in New York, Friday. A burst water main put lower Manhattan streets around the Flatiron Building under more than a foot of water overnight, then as the streets dried, fire erupted from a gas main at the site of the break. — AP/UNB photo

Israel asks US to postpone Ross' trip Netanyahu agrees to pull out from 10 to 15 pc of West Bank

JERUSALEM, Jan 3: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has agreed to pull out troops from between 10 and 15 per cent of the West Bank in the next withdrawal, Israel television reported Friday, says AFP.

Netanyahu made the commitment in talks with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Paris last month, a policy statement of the US National Security Council.

Netanyahu's spokesman Shai Bazak told the television the report was false and that the government had yet to decide the scope of the withdrawal.

In Washington NSC spokesman Eric Rubin said: "I can't imagine what (statement) they are talking about," our public policy... is that this issue need to be settled through negotiations among the parties."

During the meeting, Albright insisted that Netanyahu, in his talks with US President Bill Clinton slated for mid-January, would have to outline the precise scope of the withdrawal or face the imposition of a US proposal, according to the document, the television said.

The Israeli government okayed the principle of the withdrawal from Israeli-occupied Arab land last month but delayed a decision on the scope of the pullout that is called for in peace accords with the Palestinians.

The NSC spokesman said "We're not issuing statements" on the scope of withdrawals.

The withdrawal would be the second of three additional redeployments that Israel has agreed to in peace accords. Israel had already proposed a first withdrawal but it was rejected by the Palestinians as insufficient.

Israeli media reports had previously put the Israeli proposals for the second withdrawal at between six and eight per cent while the Palestinians have demanded at least 30 per cent.

Netanyahu has, as a condition to the second withdrawal, insisted the Palestinians agree to give up a third withdrawal and enter directly into talks on

the final status agreement between the sides.

But Albright insisted the United States would continue to push for the third withdrawal unless the Palestinians agreed to Netanyahu's proposals, the television said.

Meanwhile, the Israeli government has asked the State Department to postpone the trip of US mediator Dennis Ross was to make to the region from Monday, a US official said Friday.

The Israelis did contact US concerning the timing of this trip," the official acknowledged, speaking privately.

He stressed that a final decision had not yet been made, adding "I don't rule out that the mission goes ahead as scheduled," the State Department earlier said Ross would arrive in Israel Monday.

"We are still discussing it with the Israelis," the official said, hinting Washington was trying to convince the Israelis not to delay the trip, stressing "We still believe that it is very important to achieve progress in the peace process as quickly as possible."

The United States has been pushing Netanyahu to come up with a credible plan for troop withdrawals from the West Bank in line with US-backed peace accords with the Palestinians.

Brutal!

ISLAMABAD, Jan 3: Two brothers allegedly killed their married sister in a Pakistani village because they suspected her of committing adultery, press reports said today, says AFP.

The men allegedly strangled the woman in her village home in the district of Okara in Punjab province, the Associated Press of Pakistan news agency reported.

The deceased was mother of three children, the report said, without giving other details.

Offensive against LTTE likely to slow down

COLOMBO, Jan 3: The Sri Lankan military offensive to open a land route to the north, open Jaffna peninsula is expected to slow down with the army and political analysts cautioning against haste to meet the government's approaching target date, reports India Abroad News Service.

Senior military officers are of the opinion that any attempt to speed up the operation would result in heavy troop casualties. They point out that the 17 km stretch to link up troop columns with Kilinochchi, the military held township in the North, lies along the most fortified strongholds of the Tamil Tiger rebels.

Political analysts too said that it was ill-advised to link the opening of the land route with the golden jubilee of the island nation's independence on February 4.

This would give a different twist to the objectives of the military operation, they said. "It is part of the strategy to restore government rule and establish peace in the North," said political analyst Pakyasothi Saravanamuttu.

"Linking it with the golden jubilee of independence would send wrong signals to the Tamil people, who actually appreciate the government's intention of restoring civil administration in the North," he explained.

Local government elections in the government-controlled areas in the North are being held on January 29 with four Tamil parties contesting.

Sri Lanka's Deputy Defence Minister, General Anuruddha Ratwatte, had announced last month that the Operation Jayasikurui (Victory Assured), which began on May 13 last year, would be completed before

the 50th independence anniversary.

Military officers said that unless the troops consolidate their positions after every few kilometres before resuming the forward march, the army would suffer heavy casualties.

"If we rush, the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) would hit weaker spots on the military column causing heavy damage as they had done in the past," a senior officer told IANS, requesting not to be identified.

More than 110 soldiers have been killed and around 2,000 wounded in the operation so far. The LTTE has also suffered heavy losses. Defence Spokesman Brigadier Sarath Munasinghe said the offensive has killed more than 3,000 Tiger rebels, but independent sources put the LTTE casualty figure to be around 1,500.