

Chinese bid to expand ties with Taiwan

BEIJING, Jan 9: Mayors and country magistrates taking office following a recent Taiwan election are welcome to visit the Chinese mainland and help improve relations, an official report said Friday, reports AP.

The gesture, reported in the newspaper China Daily, was the latest in a series of signs that China and Taiwan, rivals since the ruling Nationalists fled to the island following the 1949 Communist takeover on the mainland, may be preparing to resume talks.

China suspended the negotiations after Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui visited the United States in June 1995. The suspension brought to a halt talks on technical and civil matters such as fishing disputes and the return of hijackers that had begun in 1993.

Beijing, which regards Taiwan as a breakaway province, objects to all visits by Taiwan officials to nations with which China has diplomatic ties.

China's semi-official Association for Relations Across

Taiwan Straits was urging the newly elected Taiwan officials to help improve ties, the China Daily report said.

Officials at Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation said earlier this week that Yang Xiaoming, ARATS deputy secretary, had asked to join a mainland delegation that will attend a Taiwan conference on environmental management and urban planning in mid-January.

In February, the wife of Beijing's chief negotiator for Taiwan, Tang Shubai, is expected to accompany a children's choir from Beijing, the foundation said.

The sporadic visits began in August, when Liu Gangqi, another deputy secretary-general of the Chinese association, visited Taiwan.

In October, Taiwan suggested a resumption of talks, and China invited Chiao Jen-ho, secretary-general of the Straits Exchange Foundation, to visit last December.

Israel plans 30,000 more homes in WB

JERUSALEM, Jan 9: Israel has tentative plans to build 30,000 more homes in Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the next two decades, the Housing Ministry said Friday, reports AP.

The Haaretz newspaper said half the units have already been approved for construction, a claim denied by the ministry.

The building programme would double the Jewish settler population — now 150,000 — and make it increasingly difficult for the Palestinians to establish a state in the disputed territories.

"For all practical purposes, there is no peace process right now," said Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo. "The Israeli position is more settlement, more land confiscation and more arrogance in refusing to implement the (peace) agreement."

Under the accords, Israel is

to withdraw in three stages from large areas of the West Bank by mid-1998.

US Mideast envoy Dennis Ross, who has been shuttling between Israeli and Palestinian leaders this week in hopes of narrowing the gaps, said Thursday that settlement expansion was "not helpful."

The United States has asked Israel to suspend construction in order to improve the climate in peace talks with the Palestinians. However, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said he would not slow building, saying the peace accords already signed did not bar Israel from expanding settlements.

The Housing Ministry on Friday confirmed a report in the Haaretz daily that it has tentative plans to build 30,000 more homes in the settlements by the year 2020.

"We conducted a survey of potential building possibilities in the country, and we arrived at the conclusion that in the settlements, 30,000 more homes could be added, half of which could be in the Jerusalem area," said ministry spokesman Moshe Eilat.

Haaretz, citing a document it had obtained, said 14,600 units had already been approved for construction or are in the final stages of approval. Eilat said the plan still awaiting approval.

Under the plan, the settlement of Ariel would double in size, Haaretz said. Ariel currently has 3,300 homes and 3,690 more would be added, the report said. Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, the final authority on all construction in the West Bank and Gaza, has already approved 2,150 of those homes, the newspaper said.

Annan to visit 5 ME states, areas controlled by PA

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 9: Secretary-General Kofi Annan will visit five Middle East Middle Eastern countries and the Palestinian territories next month on his first tour of the region since taking office a year ago, a UN source said Thursday, reports Reuters.

The itinerary will include Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Syria and the territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority.

Annan will also visit UN peace-keeping operations in the region, including the UN truce supervision organization (UNTSO), whose headquarters are in Jerusalem; the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) that serves as a buffer between the Israeli and Syrian armies on the Golan Heights; and the UN interim force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

Annan headed UN peace-keeping operations before becoming secretary-general at the beginning of 1997. Since then his only Middle East visit was to Iran last month.

'UN has no role to play in Algeria'

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 9: The United Nations has no role to play in Algeria, the Algerian ambassador said here Thursday, calling instead on Europe to help the country fight terrorism, reports AP.

"We have said repeatedly that the United Nations has no role to play in Algeria," Abdallah Baali told reporters here, rejecting a Washington-proposed inquiry on civilian massacres in Algeria.

Baali said Algerian officials objected to a UN inquiry because "that would mean there are doubts over who is responsible for the massacres, while everyone knows who they are."

Earlier Thursday diplomats and UN officials said the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson planned to send a representative to Algeria as a first step towards an investigation of the massacres.

At the same time they ruled out a UN Security Council role in seeking an end to Algerian unrest.

Some 600 people have reportedly died in a string of massacres since December 30.

Such atrocities are routinely blamed on Islamic extremists defying President Liamine Zoual's regime, six years after the military cancelled elections that fundamentalists were set to win.

Baali said his government was open to beginning a "political dialogue" with Europe.

"There is a very clear distinction between a commission of inquiry and the political dialogue that we have begun with Europe. We have never refused to undertake a dialogue with European officials," he added.

"What we're asking Europe for is to do more — to dismantle the terrorists' logistical, financial and weapons-supply networks."

Referring to a mission the European Union wants to send to Algeria, Baali said Algeria would "accept any mission whose goal is to exchange views in order to strengthen our fight against terrorism."

UNSC deplores air raids on Bamiyan airport

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 9: Security Council members deplored on Thursday recent air raids on Bamiyan Airport in central Afghanistan, while it was being used for deliveries of UN relief aid, reports Reuters.

"They stressed that such deliberate attacks on humanitarian UN personnel are unacceptable," a statement read to reporters by council president Alain Dejammet of France said.

The statement echoed one issue on Wednesday by a spokesman for Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who said the bombing occurred despite prior clearances by the Islamic Taliban authorities for UN aid flights.

The Taliban, who captured Kabul, the capital, in September 1996 and control two-thirds of the country, is battling an opposition alliance.

The Security Council state-

ment, issued after a briefing by Annan's special envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi supported a call by the secretary-general for the Taliban to allow the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance and to cease any action endangering the safety of humanitarian personnel.

A UN spokesman in Islamabad, Pakistan, said earlier this week that on December 31, 1997, bombs fell at Bamiyan close to a cargo plane chartered by the World Food Programme and that the next day bombs landed near a UN passenger aircraft from which officials were disembarking to investigate the earlier raids.

The Security Council statement also expressed deep concern over recent reports of mass killings of unarmed civilians and prisoners of war in Afghanistan.

Mir crewmen examine leaky hatch, find defective lock

MOSCOW, Jan 9: Two Russian cosmonauts suited up and stepped out into space for more than three hours Friday to collect science experiments and find out why the exit hatch on the Mir space station has been losing pressure, reports AP.

Cosmonauts Anatoly Solovoy and Pavel Vinogradov discovered that one of 10 main locks on the hatch door was broken, which prevented a tight seal, said Mission Control Chief Viktor Blagov.

He expressed relief at the news, since the repair is comparably simple and can be done without another spacewalk, he said.

"It's not easy to do this in gloves," Blagov said. "These small parts are not meant to be repaired by somebody wearing a spacesuit."

During the spacewalk, the two veteran cosmonauts also crawled along the hull to a neighbouring module to retrieve a box containing materials can tests of various materials designed for use in the vacuum of space.

NASA astronaut David Wolf filmed his crewmates' movements from inside the station

and stood by to help out in case of an emergency.

The hatch on the Mir's Kvant-2 module had failed to close properly after a spacewalk last November, resulting in a partial loss of pressure in the module. However, the situation was not considered serious, as the hatch was sealed from the rest of the station.

Still, it has been inconvenient, forcing the crew to don their bulky spacesuits in a smaller compartment nearby.

During their examination, Solovoy and Vinogradov discovered that the spoke that inserts into the lock had become frozen and would need to be replaced, Blagov said.

But he said a tight seal was possible in the interim because the hatch has an additional 10 auxiliary locks. Only five of the auxiliary locks were latched after the previous spacewalk, which is why there was some leakage, Blagov said.

Blagov said the hatch repair will be scheduled sometime after next Wednesday, when the crew's next spacewalk is scheduled.



President Khatami in an interview with CNN Broadcaster Christiane Amanpour, left, in Tehran, Thursday. President Khatami said Thursday that Iran remains opposed to the Middle East peace process but will not prevent Israel and the Palestinians from trying to reach an agreement.

— AP/UNB photo

Move to improve ties

US will take 'serious' look at Iranian offer of cultural exchanges

WASHINGTON, Jan 9: The Clinton administration said Thursday it would take a "serious, hard look" at a proposal by Iranian President Mohammad Khatami for expanded cultural exchanges with Iran. But it said such activities are no substitute for government-to-government dialogue, reports AP.

Administration officials, after an in-depth review of Khatami's comments in a ground-breaking interview, welcomed the "new tone" he expressed but rejected his hostile characterisation of American foreign policy and of Israel as a "racist, terrorist regime."

President Bill Clinton offered no immediate personal reaction, although his spokesman said he "appreciates those positive remarks" made by Khatami.

In a CNN interview aired Wednesday, Khatami said he hoped to open "a crack in the wall of mistrust" between the two countries and proposed exchanges of scholars, artists, writers and tourists.

State Department spokesman James P. Rubin noted that US journalists already visit Iran and that tourists go there as well. But he nonetheless saw Khatami's offer as an opening.

"We are going to take a serious, hard look" at the possibility of expanding such contacts, he said.

Rubin seemed disappointed that Khatami was not more forthcoming about the possibility of a dialogue between the two governments.

"We think that that would be the best way to overcome the differences," the spokesman said. "We should sit down and air differences. We would raise our concerns; the Iranians could raise their concerns."

Richard Murphy, a former assistant secretary for the Middle East, saw the prospect for exchanges as a hopeful sign, recalling that US and Chinese participants in a ping-pong tournament in 1971 helped pave the way for an end to a two-decade estrangement.

The possibility of cultural exchanges was greeted with interest by James McCloud, Senior Vice President of AMIDEAST, which promotes understanding with peoples of the Middle East.

He said current restrictions prohibit the kind of exchanges his group encourages.

As for official relations, Rubin said improved ties would depend on a halt to Iranian support for terror and the development of weapons of mass destruction. He noted the United States also objects to Iran's "violent opposition" to the Middle East peace process.

Khatami said Iran would not prevent attempts by Israel and the Palestinians to reach peace.

Rubin declined to answer a question on Iran's participation in terrorist incidents since Khatami took office last August. But other State Department officials said that Iran was responsible for the deaths of 11 Iranian dissidents outside of Iran in 1997.

Niger's former PM, 6 others charged with plotting to kill president

NIAMEY, Jan 9: Niger's former prime minister Hama Amadou and six others people have been charged after the disclosure of a suspected plot to assassinate President Ibrahim Bare Maïnassara, Justice Minister Issoufou Haba Moussa said late Thursday, reports AP.

Moussa told a press conference that Amadou had been charged with forming a militia within a political party, the six others with criminal association and two of those with possession of weapons.

Amadou was provisionally freed Thursday, a week after being arrested at home on January 2 after being accused on television of being the "brain" behind a plot to assassinate Maïnassara and other prominent citizens of the West African country.

In televised testimony on January 1, four men had accused Amadou of recruiting them to form a hit-squad to carry out the killings.

On Wednesday, two other former ministers, Bazoum Mohammed and Issoufou Assoumane were freed.

They were detained after dismissing the plot as a "crude set-up", during interviews with foreign radio stations.

Lankan workers threaten strike for better wages

COLOMBO, Jan 9: Hundreds of thousands of labourers on Sri Lanka's tea, rubber and coconut plantations — the country's economic lifeline — have threatened to stop work unless they are given more wages, union leaders and business officials said Friday, reports AP.

The Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre, an umbrella group of 11 trade unions representing 600,000 plantation workers, said in a statement they will stop work from Feb 5 if their wages are not increased.

The unions want daily wages increased from 83 rupees (dhs 1.36) to 105 rupees (dhs 1.72). The estate owners said they can give a maximum of 93 rupees (dhs 1.52).

lot of play in the region" in the past few years.

It is media coverage like that, the professor said, that promotes and expands respect for all human rights, governments in Africa appear to care more now about what their citizens think, he suggested, and thus can be held more accountable by an inquiring press, which, after all, he said, is the basic safeguard for liberty in all democracies.

Because of this watchdog role, journalism "can be a dangerous profession" and "it is critical that there be international organisations that can help to protect journalists. The pressure exerted by governments as well as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) is important, and I can think of a number of examples where this has brought about the release of

26 journalists slain in 14 countries in '97

NEW YORK, Jan 9: Twenty-six journalists were killed in 14 countries in 1997, either in reprisal for their work or victims of terrorist attacks, the Committee to Protect Journalists of New York and Reporters Sans Frontières of Paris reported, reports AP.

The organisations said seven journalists were slain in India, four in Colombia, three in Mexico and two in Cambodia. Assassination claimed the life of a journalist in each of 10 other countries last year — Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, the Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and the Ukraine.

"Tragically, homicide remains the leading cause of job-related death for journalists around the world and the motive is censorship," the organisations said in a joint statement. "If governments allow these crimes to go unpunished, constitutional guarantees of press freedom are meaningless."

In only four cases — in Argentina, Guatemala, Ukraine and Mexico — have authorities identified those responsible for the killings. The two organisations have called on all 14 governments to conduct investigations.

All 26 journalists were killed either while on assignment or as a direct result of their work, according to researchers at the press freedom organisations.

In other cases of slain journalists in 1997, neither group could establish a clear link between the killing and the victims' profession. Several of these cases remain under investigation by the groups, which conduct their research independently.

In 1996, Reporters Sans Frontières reported 28 slayings of journalists and the Committee to Protect Journalists reported 27 cases. Algeria and Russia were the most dangerous countries for journalists in 1996.

In 1997, for the first time since 1993, no Algerian journalists were assassinated, the groups said. Nearly 60 Algerian journalists have been killed because of their profession in the

previous five years, more than in any other country. But this is not a signal of improved press freedom in that country, said Robert Menard, secretary general of Reporters Sans Frontières.

There are fewer victims because so many Algerian journalists have gone underground, fled into exile or left the profession entirely, while those who remain on the job live and work under the most extreme security precautions," Menard said.

The seven deaths in India last year reflect a trend of increasing political violence and heightened risk for journalists there, the report said. Five members of a television production crew died on assignment in Hyderabad November 19, in a terrorist car bomb blast, which killed at least 17 others and injured more than 30. Two Muslim broadcast journalists were fatally shot in apparent reprisal for their work on the state-owned Doordarshan television station in Srinagar, Kashmir. Both had received death threats from militant separatists.

In Colombia, the four 1997 deaths brings to 43 the number of journalists slain in the past decade, the largest number in the Americas, most of them presumed to be victims of drug traffickers.

The three brutal killings of Mexican journalists last year also indicate a disturbing, violent trend in the world's largest Spanish-speaking country, the report said.

UN hails Egypt's ban on female circumcision

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 9: The UN Children's Fund chief on Thursday hailed Egypt's ban on female circumcision as a big step towards eliminating the abhorrent and unacceptable practice, reports AP.

In a statement released here, UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy said that elimination of this abhorrent and unacceptable practice is a long term undertaking.

Photos support theory of new planet orbiting nearby star

WASHINGTON, Jan 9: A bulging warp spotted in photos of a star called Beta Pictoris may be the gravitational wake of a large planet plowing through the star's dusty halo, astronomers say, reports AP.

The pictures boost the theory that one or more planets have formed about Beta Pictoris, a young, bright star 63 light-years from the sun, Sally Heap, a NASA astronomer, said Thursday.

The pictures, taken by a new camera on the Hubble Space Telescope, focus on the disk or halo of dust and gas that rotates around the star. Instead of having a smooth flow, the disk has a large bulge in one quadrant.

BRIEFLY

Blast hurts 5 in S Lebanon: Guerillas detonated two roadside bombs in southern Lebanon on Thursday, wounding four Israelis and a pro-Israeli militiaman, Lebanese and Israeli security officials said, AP reports from Marjayoun, Lebanon.

A remote-controlled bomb exploded as an Israeli convoy went down the Ain Abel-Bint Jbel road in the Israeli-occupied zone at 2:15 pm (1215 GMT), Lebanese security officials said. Lebanese officials said the explosion wounded four Israeli soldiers and two militiamen of the Israeli-backed South Lebanon Army.

Fire kills 6 in Penang: Six people were killed and two others hospitalised when fire razed a two-story building in Penang, a newspaper reported Friday, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

The New Straits Times said Chan Yean Moi, 37, her four children and her brother Chan Yu Cheng, 40 were killed in the blaze Thursday night. They were sleeping in the upper floor of the building, which housed a mini-market on the ground floor. Chan's husband, Chiang Haw Choon, 40, told reporters he jumped out of the top floor with his 2-year-old son. The others could not flee because cooking-gas tanks on the roof and first floor were exploding.

3 UK soldiers killed in road mishap: Three British soldiers were killed in a road accident late Thursday when an army land rover crashed into an articulated lorry in Northern Ireland, an army spokesman said, AFP reports from Markethill, Northern Ireland.

Three other servicemen and a police officer suffered head and other injuries in the crash which happened when the four-wheel drive land rover collided with a lorry near the town of Markethill, south of Belfast.

Avalanche kills 3 in Brazil: Three people died in Salvador, north east Brazil on Thursday after a mudslide destroyed their homes following a leak in an illegally installed water pipe, Globo television said, Ruter says from Sao Paulo.

Two women and a girl died after an avalanche of mud crashed into three buildings at around 4:30 am (0730 GMT), causing extensive damage Globo said.

3 die as small plane crashes in NZ: Two Japanese tourists and their pilot died Thursday in a light plane crash on Mount Prospect on New Zealand's South Island, police said, AP reports from Wellington.

The names and home towns of the Japanese tourists were not immediately released by police, pending notification of relatives. Sgt. Stewart Munro of the Invercargill police said the Queenstown-based male pilot had passengers on a shuttle flight from Te Anau on the edge of Fiordland National Park to the Queenstown skiing and recreational area.



Searchers, some using dogs, search the woods for Brittany Lynn Locklear Thursday, near Raeford, NC, where she was kidnapped on Wednesday. The five-year-old child was found dead Thursday afternoon. Police said the body would be sent to the state medical examiner's office in Chapel Hill for an autopsy.

— AP/UNB photo

'Free press vital to promote human rights'

WASHINGTON, Jan 9: After a 20-year career as a newspaperman and a stint as a foreign correspondent in Africa, American university professor Joe Campbell says a free press is absolutely vital to promoting human rights, report USIS.

"Certainly, the very fundamental aspect of news gathering and dissemination, the mere reporting of human rights issues, tends to expand the realm of debate, discussion, and awareness of human rights and human rights violations, including those against journalists," Campbell said December 10.

Campbell made his remarks during an electronic interview with audiences in Africa on the subject of human rights and the protection of journalists. The programme was broadcast live worldwide by the US Informa-

tion Agency's (USIA's) Worldnet Satellite Television Service.

During his career as a newspaperman and correspondent, Campbell reported from four continents, in Africa he was an associated press correspondent, based in Abidjan. He covered, among other things, the war in Chad, political upheavals in Guinea and Burkina Faso, and Nigeria's 1983 presidential elections.

According to Campbell, "in Sub-Saharan Africa and in many countries, journalists are a frequent target for oppression, unfortunately, so the news media have a very vital central role in expanding the discussion of human rights throughout the world."

Nonetheless, he said, "there have been great strides in Sub-Saharan Africa in the last eight to 10 years in the general ex-

pansion of the number of news-gathering outlets, independent newspapers, and non-governmental broadcast stations, and in terms of news-gathering on human rights issues as well as with most investigative reporting, there has to be a recognition that this is not going to be a short-term option."

By way of comparison, he said, the United States has had press freedom for more than 200 years, yet "journalists still are pushed and pushed themselves to maintain and to expand the scope of their rights and privileges, and this is indeed the case in Africa as well."

A specialist on the press in francophone Africa, Campbell pointed to "a number of excellent examples of straight reporting about human rights issues and violations in Sub-Saharan Africa that have gotten a

lot of play in the region" in the past few years.

It is media coverage like that, the professor said, that promotes and expands respect for all human rights, governments in Africa appear to care more now about what their citizens think, he suggested, and thus can be held more accountable by an inquiring press, which, after all, he said, is the basic safeguard for liberty in all democracies.

Because of this watchdog role, journalism "can be a dangerous profession" and "it is critical that there be international organisations that can help to protect journalists. The pressure exerted by governments as well as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) is important, and I can think of a number of examples where this has brought about the release of

certain journalists as well as kept other journalists from being imprisoned or harassed."

As for journalists who have driven into exile, Campbell said they still have a role to play "by bringing attention to the abuses back in their homes."

It is unfortunate, he said, "but I believe that organisations like the committee to protect journalists and Reporters Sans Frontières are better known overseas than in their host countries, where journalists are only vaguely aware of their existence." These groups, he said, "work to help journalists overseas that are under stress."

The committee to protect journalists was established in 1981 in New York city to support and protest on behalf of journalists around the world who are victims of human rights abuses.