

UAE prof urges Muslim states not to allow human cloning

DUBAI, Jan 11: A medical professor from the United Arab Emirates has called on Muslim governments not to allow Western researchers to carry out human cloning experiments banned in their own countries, newspapers reported here Saturday, says AFP.

Governments "should ban any research organisation or scientist, local or foreign, who seeks to use Islamic countries as an arena for carrying out illegal experiments on human cloning," said Mamun Al-Shaqfa, professor of medicine at the Medical Faculty here.

Shaqfa was speaking at a seminar in the UAE Emirate of Sharjah organised in response to Chicago-based scientist Richard Seed's announcement Wednesday that he intended to pursue human cloning in the United States or anywhere else in the world he was allowed to.

"Islam is not opposed to scientific research, but authorisation of any experiment is not recommended unless the Sharia (Islamic Law) pronounces on its legality or illegality," Shaqfa said.

"Human cloning is inadmissible because it destroys the basic social concepts of the family, married life and parenthood," said Mohammed Al-Morsi Zahra, doyen of the Faculty of Theology and Law at the UAE University.

"Instead of wasting billions of dollars on human cloning, it would be more worthwhile to improve the health and social conditions of human beings," he said.

State of emergency in 5 storm-hit counties in US

NEW YORK, Jan 11: New York State Governor George Pataki said Saturday President Bill Clinton granted his request to declare a federal state of emergency in five winter storm-hit northern counties, reports AFP.

Pataki also said he had asked Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) chief James Lee Witt for federal help in cleaning up the mess left by days of ice storms and bitter cold.

"We are dedicating every resource possible to help the people of the (state's) north county, but it is clear we need federal assistance to respond to a disaster that far surpasses anything we have ever seen," Pataki said in a statement.

Pataki requested from FEMA such help as 1,625 generators, 25,000 cots and 50,000 blankets, and 750,000 meals — enough to feed 25,000 people three times a day for 10 days.

The disaster, clearing the way for federal aid, was declared in Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Jefferson and St Lawrence counties.

"As the situation merits, the federal government is poised to provide whatever help that may be required to ensure normal living conditions are restored as soon as possible," Witt said in a separate statement released in Washington.

Quake death toll rises to 48 in China

NANTAN, China, Jan 11: The death toll from a powerful tremor near China's Great Wall rose to 48 Sunday, with more than 1,200 people seriously injured, as rescue work continued after a bitterly cold night, officials said, reports AFP.

In Natan, one of scores of villages struck by Saturday's magnitude 6.2 earthquake, farmers terrified that their quake-damaged earth and brick homes would collapse spent the night huddled under hastily erected lean-tos.

In four towns along the border between Zhangbei and Shanggou counties, 60 per cent of the houses were flattened, said Huangfu Qing, a seismologist coordinating rescue work from Zhangjiakou, the largest city near the quake-hit area. Xinhua said more than 70,000 houses collapsed.

Medical teams, including some from the People's Liberation Army, were sent to the area, Xinhua said. More than 1,500 soldiers from Beijing were also dispatched, along with 500 tents and 5,000 winter coats, it said.

20m new voters enrolled for Indian polls

NEW DELHI, Jan 11: India, the world's largest democracy will have 20 million new voters in the February-March national elections, the Press Trust of India reported today, says AFP.

It quoted officials as saying that the voting population had risen to 620 million from 600 million since the last general elections in 1996.

Indian elections are held on a massive scale, involving around 900,000 polling stations, with 4.5 million people conducting the balloting.

The country's population, which increases by around 18 million a year — the equivalent of the population of Australia — currently stands at about 960 million.

India is expected to overtake China as the world's most populous nation before the middle of the next century.

24 Shiite Muslims killed in Lahore

LAHORE, Jan 11: Gunmen opened fire on a memorial service in a Shiite Muslim graveyard in the heart of Pakistan's eastern Punjab capital of Lahore on Sunday killing 24 people, and injuring more than 30 others, police said, reports AP.

Many of the wounded who were brought to Lahore's Mayo Hospital were in critical condition with gunshot wounds, said hospital officials.

Relatives of the dead arrived at the hospital wailing and beating their chests and screaming at police to arrest the gunmen. More than 100 policemen surrounded the hospital, Lahore's largest hospital.

It wasn't immediately clear who was behind the shooting, but officials fear it was religiously motivated.

The police suspect the gunmen belonged to a group known as the Sipah-e-Sahabah, or the Friends of the Guardians of the Prophet, a militant Sunni group. However no one has taken responsibility for the killing.

There is no doubt that Sipah-e-Sahabah was involved in the firing and there will definitely be repercussions," said

Hasan Turabi, a leader of the Tehrik-e-Jafria or Movement for Shiite Muslim Law in Pakistan.

Turabi, contacted by The Associated Press in the southern port city of Karachi, didn't say what form of repercussion would occur as a result of the massacre.

Nearly 100 Shiite Muslim worshippers had gathered at the graveyard to offer prayers for their departed relatives when two gunmen on a motorcycle drove up and opened fire with automatic weapons, police said.

People scrambled for cover, but before the shooting stopped 20 people were dead and another 30 wounded. Four others died later in hospital.

"We were in the middle of our prayers," said a trembling imam Hassan, 52. "Two men with kalashnikovs just walked up and started firing. Everyone started screaming and trying to find a place to hide, but they just kept on firing."

The wounded and dead were taken to nearby hospitals by people in the area, while they waited for the ambulances to

arrive. The shooting went on for several minutes.

Worshippers stopped motorised rickshaws, motorcycles and passing cars to take the wounded to the hospital, said Hassan.

"Even the ambulance didn't arrive for a long time," he said. Police officials, who took about one hour to get to the scene, have cordoned off the area.

Turabi accused the Punjab administration of failing to protect Pakistan's minority Shiite community.

"They are not doing their duty to protect us," he said.

Nearly 300 people have been killed in religiously motivated violence in the past one year. Most of the killings have occurred in Pakistan's most populous Punjab province.

Most of Pakistan's 140 million people are Sunni Muslims who hold no grudge against their Shiite Muslim brethren. However, small, well armed militant groups have emerged in Pakistan and they routinely clash.

Pakistan will introduce constitutional changes

ISLAMABAD, Jan 11: Pakistan will introduce constitutional changes to reallocate power between the president and prime minister following last year's political crisis, Law Minister Khalid Anwar said in an interview published here on Saturday, reports AFP.

The package is aimed at removing ambiguities to prevent confrontation between state institutions in future and will be presented next month, he told the news daily.

Pakistan was caught in a bitter constitutional crisis late last year because of a power struggle between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and President Farooq Ahmed Leghari, who resigned on December 2.

The minister said the reforms would also readjust the powers of the judiciary and provide a quota of reserved seats for women in parliament.

Anwar said the ruling Pakistan Muslim League would consult parliamentary allies and the opposition in an attempt to seek agreement and avoid future confrontation.

Sharif and new President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar, elected by the parliament and provincial assemblies on December 31, have previously given hints about the plan.

The constitution, unanimously passed by parliament in 1973 under civilian leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, has undergone a series of changes over the past 24 years that included a long spell of military rule.

Ali Bhutto, father of current opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, was toppled in a military coup in 1977 and hanged two years later under military president Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq. Zia ruled until his death in a plane crash in 1988.

Some major constitutional amendments, including a clause that gave the president power to dissolve the elected assembly and government, were introduced by Zia in 1985 in a bargain with the then indirectly-elected national assembly.

The discretionary presidential power was used by Zia himself in 1988 before his death and later by civilian presidents. Leghari sacked Benazir Bhutto as prime minister and dissolved the assembly in November 1996.

Sharif, himself a victim of the presidential powers during his first 1990-1993 term, promptly scrapped the controversial article after regaining power in February 1997 elections with a massive mandate.

Precious artefacts of Indian presidential palace missing

NEW DELHI, Jan 11: More than a hundred precious artefacts have been reported missing from a museum in the presidential palace, reports India Abroad News Service.

The items reported missing in a lead story in the Indian Express newspaper include a gold-gilded tableware, cake stand, ornaments, porridge dish, pudding plate, rose water sprinkler among others things.

Most of these articles may have been gifts given to presidents during their visits inside the country and abroad.

Officials do not rule out the possibility of the involvement of museum staff. "We are examining the possibility of it being done by an insider or an outsider," a police officer was quoted as saying by the newspaper.

The theft was first reported by the keeper of the museum on December 26. "A detailed stocktaking was taken up immediately thereafter," said a press note issued by TP

Seetharam, Press Secretary to President K R Narayanan.

The museum was inaugurated by former President Ramaswamy Venkatraman in 1992. It was, however, shut down after he left office. The museum fell into disuse thereafter resulting in rain-water seepage and fungal and termite infestation.

President Narayanan has now directed officials to keep the remaining 300 odd objects of the museum in the store-rooms of the presidential palace.

The presidential mansion, called the Rashtrapati Bhavan, is widely acclaimed as a masterpiece of architecture. It was built in 1929 by the world renowned architect Edwin Lutyens as an act of homage to the British monarch and was said to be destined to prove the truth of Northcote Parkinson's observation that "perfection of planned layout is achieved only by institutions on the point of collapse."

Sonia starts campaign for Cong I

Mahesh Uniyal writes from New Delhi

An inspired Congress party is hoping to cash in on the charisma associated with India's most well known political family as Sonia Gandhi hit the campaign trail yesterday from the spot where her husband was assassinated nearly seven years ago.

Sonia Gandhi will begin campaigning for next month's national election from Sriperumbudur, about 80 km from Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu state, where former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a suspected Sri Lankan Tamil Tiger suicide bomber at a May 1991 Congress poll rally.

She was also scheduled to address election meetings in key southern states over the next few days in the first phase of campaigning which the party hopes will give it the winning start for the election.

The Gandhi widow, who once accompanied her husband on his gruelling poll campaign tours across the towns and villages of the country, had only once addressed a public rally in the years since her husband's

death. That was two years ago at Gandhi's former constituency of Amethi in Uttar Pradesh where she expressed anguish about the delay in the working of the panel probing her husband's assassination.

However, this week Sonia shed aside her usual aloofness to throw open the doors of her highly fortified residence in New Delhi to party workers. She was seen acknowledging greetings from hundreds of party workers who thronged 10, Janpath from all over the country to congratulate her on her decision to campaign.

Newspapers reported how Sonia's presence electrified her audience who sang shouted slogans and, as one paper described, "sent everyone in a tizzy". Delegations of party activists thrust memoranda into her hands recommending their candidates for various electoral constituencies. Sonia did not respond to any of these requests but merely passed them on to party leaders.

Meanwhile octogenarian Congress President Sitaram

Kesri chose to sail with the political wind by declaring his loyalty to the Gandhi-Nehru family and calling Sonia the "supreme leader" for whom he was ready to give up his party leadership at a moment's notice.

"All I have been given by them (the Nehru-Gandhi family). It will not take me a second to give up everything if she (Sonia Gandhi) desires," Kesri thundered while asking party workers not to be misled by media reports of a Kesri-Sonia rift which he said were the work of the party's enemies.

However, the so-called third force was in trouble with a split in the anti-BJP front forged after the 1996 general election. Besides the BJP, the United Front (UF) combine ruling India since June 1996 would also have to take on the Jan Morcha (People's Front) floated by former JD President and ex-Bihar Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav who had joined hands with the Congress and the pro-Dalit (lower caste) Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

— India Abroad News Service

Iraq accuses US of HR violations

BAGHDAD, Jan 11: Iraq on Saturday accused the United States government of violating the human rights of Iraqis and of killing hundreds of thousands of people by backing crippling UN sanctions, reports Reuter.

A spokesman for the culture and information ministry in a statement carried by the official Iraqi News Agency (INA) said "this government of the United States that cries over human rights in Iraq is responsible for the deaths of Iraqis and depriving more than 22 million people in Iraq of the most basic human right and that is the right to live."

The spokesman was responding to what INA said was an editorial reflecting the views of the American government broadcast on the Voice of America on Friday.

The US State Department said that there were credible reports of mass summary executions of political prisoners in Iraq and called on Baghdad to give UN investigators access to prisons concerned.

— AP/UNB



Sonia Gandhi, wife of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi receives flowers from Congress Party activists in New Delhi Saturday. Congress Party celebrates Sonia's decision to campaign for the party during the forthcoming elections. — AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Kashmiri rebel leader held in India: A Muslim Kashmiri separatist leader has been captured after a seven-year hunt by the Indian authorities, police said yesterday, AFP reports from Srinagar.

A press release said Farooq Khar was arrested along with a dozen other leaders of the Tehreek-ul-Mujahideen movement, one of several groups fighting for Kashmir's merger with Pakistan.

Police alleged Khar is responsible for the killing of five political activists and their families.

Tajik govt frees 5 hostages: Tajik authorities Saturday released five jailed members of an armed Tajik gang in exchange for five city officials held hostage by the gang's leader, a mediator said, AFP reports from Dushanbe.

The hostage-taking is over. The five hostages taken this morning in Dushanbe have been released, said Davlat Gousmon. In exchange "the authorities released five men" belonging to the gang led by Tajik warlord Rakmon Sanguinov. Sanguinov is one of the main warlords in the Central Asian Republic of Tajikistan to have refused to hand in his weapons as agreed under a peace agreement signed last June between the neo-communist government and the Islamic opposition.

Letter bomb hurts 2 in Spain: A letter bomb sent to the home of a Spanish army officer injured two people on Saturday, a day after a Basque town councillor was killed in a car bombing blamed on the separatist guerrilla group ETA, Reuter says from Zarauz.

The letter bomb, which authorities believe was also the work of ETA, exploded in a mailbox in the Basque city of Victoria just hours before Jose Ignacio Iruretagoyena, a young politician from Spain's ruling party, was buried in the coastal town of Zarauz. Two women suffered minor injuries from flying glass when the bomb went off, police said. One of the victims, reported to be the officer's girlfriend, was taken to a local hospital, while the other was treated at the scene, officials said.

CARE's ex-president Campbell dies: Wallace J Campbell, a founder and former president and board member of the international aid and development organization CARE, died Wednesday of pneumonia at a nursing home in Los Angeles. He was 87, AP reports from Washington.

Govt, rebels reach accord in Philippines

MANILA, Jan 11: The Philippine government and Communist rebels announced an agreement Sunday on part of a human rights accord in talks aimed at ending one of the world's longest Marxist insurgencies, reports AP.

In a joint statement, negotiators of both sides said the development is "a big step forward in our common quest for a just and lasting peace and lays a solid foundation for its attainment."

The negotiations have been proceeding sporadically since 1992 in the Netherlands, where rebel leaders live in exile.

In The Hague, the negotiators initiated the draft agreement on human rights, part of their intended Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, the statement said.

The pact is the first of four accords the two sides hope to reach for a political settlement to end three decades of insurgency.

The preliminary agreement on human rights, details of which were not given, represents the first major breakthrough in the talks, said Philippine government lawyer Silvestro Bello III, one of the government negotiators.

The two sides exchanged drafts on the unresolved parts of the agreement and agreed to resume talks in the Netherlands

on January 26-30.

The negotiators had hoped to complete the agreement last week but failed to iron out differences and had to cancel a planned signing of the pact.

One of the contentious issues is a demand by the rebel National Democratic Front to include provisions of a Geneva convention setting out rules of conduct of conflict between two sovereign states.

Philippine government negotiators have opposed this, saying it would impinge on the government's constitutional sovereignty.

The government has avoided any indication that it is granting a "status of belligerency" to the rebels, maintaining that the rebellion is an internal conflict. The rebels, however, have said they have won this status and do not need outright recognition by the government.

The NDF, which represents 14 Marxist groups, said government representatives mocked them as "criminal forces" during last week's negotiations and threatened to terminate an agreement on safety and immunity guarantees for rebel leaders.

Bello disagreed, saying "Our presence here is a clear manifestation that we don't consider them terrorist."

The government has encouraged rebel negotiators to hold the talks in Manila, but they have refused, citing security worries.

'Pope's visit will help Cubans achieve more united homeland'

VATICAN CITY, Jan 11: Pope John Paul, in his annual "state of the world" address to diplomats, said on Saturday he hoped his trip later this month to Cuba will help Cubans achieve

State of emergency declared in Queensland

BRISBANE, Jan 11: A State of Emergency was declared in flood-hit Queensland state today as torrential rain caused landslides, cut road and rail links and left at least three people missing and feared drowned, an official said, reports AFP.

"We know that at least three people are missing, but we have reports that there may be many more, though we don't yet know exactly how many," State Emergency Services (SES) Executive Director Dayr Powell told reporters.

Up to 500 millimetres (20 inches) of rain fell in the worst-hit area of Townsville, about 1,200 kilometres (744 miles) north of here, with floodwaters spilling across roads and causeways throughout the city.

Townsville is in an absolute mess," Powell said, adding that it was the highest recorded downpour in the city's history.

All main arterial roads out of the city were closed and the rail link north and south cut in several places.

Govt backed forum likely to call for charges against Lissouba in DRC

KINSHASA, Jan 11: A government backed forum in the war-ravaged Republic of Congo is expected next week to recommend "genocide" charges against ousted president Pascal Lissouba, official sources said, reports AFP.

The so-called "national reconciliation forum" is expected to call for charges to be pressed against Lissouba, the former elected president who was ousted in October by former military dictator Denis Sassou Nguesso following four months of fighting.

The fighting began in June last year after forces loyal to Lissouba moved to disarm a private militia backing Sassou Nguesso.

Up to 10,000 people were reported to have died in the fighting that devastated the capital, Brazzaville, though no confirmation has ever been given of the toll.

The forum had initially been expected to complete its work Saturday and make its announcements Monday but that has been delayed and it is not due to close until Wednesday, officials said.

The forum, set up by the new authorities created by Sassou Nguesso, who previously ruled for 13 years, will also advise on the length of a proposed "transition" period before his new government should return the country to elected civilian rule.

March against violence in Basque city

ZARAUZ, Spain, Jan 11: More than 25,000 people demonstrated Saturday against separatist violence in the streets of this northern Basque city after the funeral of a conservative politician killed by a car bomb, the Europa Press Agency said, reports AFP.

They marched silently after the funeral of Jose Ignacio Iruretagoyena, which had been attended by numerous public officials.

Police blamed the Basque separatist group ETA for the car-bomb Friday that killed Iruretagoyena, a member of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar's ruling Popular Party (PP).

The victim's family, flanked by Basque president Jose Antonio Ardanza and numerous local politicians, called for "peace now, and for always."

The assassination drew defiant and emotional stance against terrorism from Aznar, who in a speech on Saturday rallied Basque people to march against separatist violence.



Thousands of Bulgarians crowd around parliament Saturday, as authorities opened the building for one day to the general public to mark the one year anniversary of popular unrest that ousted former communists from power. On January 10, 1997 an angry crowd demanding early elections surrounded and stormed the parliament where some 100 lawmakers of the then ruling Socialist Party were trapped. — AP/UNB