

Baltic leaders sign 'charter of friendship' with US

WASHINGTON, Jan 17: Leaders of the three Baltic nations signed a partnership agreement with the United States Friday, a step President Bill Clinton said could lead to membership in NATO and the European Union, reports AP.

Presidents Lennart Meri of Estonia, Guntis Ulmanis of Latvia and Algirdas Brazauskas of Lithuania joined Clinton at the White House in signing the US-Baltic Charter of Partnership. It includes a declaration of US support for eventual membership in the Transatlantic community.

Clinton said the new charter will "help reaffirm our common vision of Europe whole and free." He said it underscores the progress that has been made since the overthrow of Communist rule seven years ago.

"Today your democracies have taken root and you stand among us as leaders of fast-growing democracies," Clinton said during signing ceremonies in the East Room.

Clinton said NATO membership is not guaranteed by the agreement. But he expressed hope that the Baltics will in time walk through the door to NATO. And he said that European security can never be assured if the security of the Baltic region is in doubt.

"The next big challenge to NATO is the Baltic question," Meri said Thursday in previewing the pact. "As we have witnessed this week, the United States is ready to break the ice in this complicated but vitally important security issue."

The charter recognises the Baltic states' role in the American strategy to guarantee security and stability on the European continent and spells out that the United States has a "profound and enduring interest" in the security and sovereignty of the Baltic states," he said.

The non-binding document resulted from a compromise after the NATO summit in Madrid last summer invited Poland,

the Czech Republic and Hungary to join the alliance.

But the three Baltic states, which have been striving for membership ever since they broke free of the disintegrating Soviet Union, were not included because of Russia's objections to NATO expansion to its borders.

The charter stops short of guaranteeing the security of the three countries. In an effort to avoid antagonising Moscow, the document pointedly avoids setting a timetable for their membership in the Western alliance.

The three Baltic nations were overrun by the Red Army in 1940 and by the Soviet Union. The United States never recognised the occupation, and embassies of the three continued functioning in Washington. "The signing of the Baltic-US charter brings our partnership to a new level," Ulmanis said at a joint news conference by the three leaders. "We are becoming allies for the future."



US President Bill Clinton (R) looks on as three Baltic leaders sign a charter calling for their membership in NATO, in the East Room of the White House on Friday. From left are: Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis, Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas and Estonian President Lennart Meri.

International Turkish Welfare Party leaders vow to gear up movement

ANKARA, Jan 17: Soon after a Turkish court shut down the largest Islamic party for violating the nation's secular Constitution, the Welfare Party's leadership vowed to retain control of — and strengthen — their movement, reports AP.

"Our cause will get stronger, and supporters will grow," Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the Islamic Welfare Party, said Friday.

Welfare supporters have already established a new party, called Virtue, as a substitute for the party banned on Friday under a provision that prohibits parties based on ethnicity, religion or communist ideology.

Hours before the court announced its decision, Erbakan held a round of meeting with leaders of two centre-right parties, reportedly lobbying for revision of the constitution to lift its ban.

"It is the slaughter of the law

40 times over, but we respect the decision," Erbakan said.

Some legal experts also argued that Erbakan could challenge the ban by running on an independent ticket in the next elections.

Erbakan, among six deputies whose political activities were limited for the next five years by the court verdict, appeared poised to fight on to retain his hold on the growth Islamic movement.

"Erbakan won't give up the control of the party," said Ali Bayramoglu, a sociologist. "To say Erbakan is finished, the movement is dead, is wrong."

Welfare came out of the last elections in 1995 as leader with 21 per cent of the votes. The victory carried the party to power in a coalition with pro-western, centre-right party.

However, its rule lasted only one year.

Serb crowd attacks UN police, OSCE officials

SARAJEVO, Jan 17: A Serb crowd attacked UN police and international officials trying to enter Bosnia's Muslim enclave of Srebrenica on Friday, UN spokesman said, reports AP.

The incident occurred as members of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and a UN police escort attempted to accompany Muslim politicians to the city for the first meeting of a municipal assembly elected in September.

The mob stoned and spit upon the car carrying the acting head of the mission, Ambassador Richard Elfermann, and people tried to put him from the vehicle, the OSCE said late Friday in Sarajevo, demanding an investigation and punishment of the perpetrators.

"Such deliberate and unwarranted attacks are inconsistent with the behaviour found in a democratic country," the OSCE said. "It is clear that the attack was carefully organised to prevent the installation of the elected assembly in Srebrenica."

Serbs overran Srebrenica in July 1995. Thousands of men disappeared and are believed to have been executed. Muslim refugees now living elsewhere are registered to vote there and Muslims won the local elections.

The local councils were to have begun meeting no later than December 31, but Serbs resisted convening a municipal assembly in which Muslims hold the balance of power.

Andrea Agnelli, a spokesman for UN police in Tuzla, said a Danish policeman serving with the UN force was hit by a rock. UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said in New York that

some of about 600 Serbs attacked even after the Muslims stayed back and only the smaller group of international officials tried to go in to assess the situation.

A car with a loudspeaker drove through the town on Thursday night, urging Serbs to turn out Friday, he said.

Also Friday, a helicopter flown by the NATO-led Bosnian peace force crashed near Srebrenica, injuring two US soldiers on routine patrol.

'Incumbent Serb premier should be prosecuted'

Meanwhile, the top international mediator for Bosnia Friday urged the removal and prosecution of the current Bosnian Serb premier after a potential pro-Western successor withdrew his candidacy.

Incumbent Gojko Kljickovic is favoured by the supporters of war crimes suspect Radovan Karadzic, a strict nationalist.

On Friday, after the hard-liners repeatedly rejected him, Miladin Ivanic, the Bosnian Serb premier-designate who favours a government of national unity, took himself out of the race.

Bosnian Serb President Biljana Plavsic rejected Ivanic's withdrawal, officials said, and talks between the two and some opposition leaders were under way in Banja Luka. A decision was expected late Friday.

Outraged by inflammatory language from Kljickovic, Carlos Westendorp, the international mediator, called for moves against the Serb leader.

Fighting between Cambodian govt, opposition intensifies

PHNOM PENH, Jan 17: Clashes between Cambodian government troops and opposition forces persisted in north-west Cambodia today despite efforts by a prominent dissident politician to broker a truce, reports Reuters.

Opposition commander General Nhek Bunhachay said government forces under Second Prime Minister Hun Sen had attacked his troops around the contested border town of O'Smach over the past three days.

"A ceasefire is up to Hun Sen's side they are the ones attacking us," Bunhachay told Reuters by mobile telephone from O'Smach. The sound of shelling was audible as he spoke.

He said five of his soldiers had been wounded in recent days but he had no information about casualties on the government side.

In Phnom Penh, Defence Minister Tea Banh said opposition forces were provoking his conflict.

"They're the ones who provoke the problem, they attack our forces every day. So why should the government let them stay there?" Tea Banh told

Reuters. AP adds: More than 200 shells were fired across the Thai-Cambodian frontier and three Thai soldiers were wounded as fighting intensified between resistance and government forces along the tense border, a senior Thai officer said Saturday.

The officer, who insisted on anonymity, said fighting around the royalist resistance base of O'Smach over the past three days was the heaviest since mid-December.

The Thai officer said 129 artillery, mortar and tank rounds fell inside Thai territory from the fighting inside Cambodia, forcing Thai border troops to fire back 102 artillery rounds in an effort to suppress the cross-border shelling.

The officer was quoting Maj Gen Vivat Satharak, the Thai regional commander, who called an urgent press conference Saturday to douse fears that war had erupted between Thai and Cambodian forces.

Five artillery rounds landed inside Thailand on Saturday, with heavy fighting reported before noon but later subsiding.



An unidentified Iraqi man recites poetry in praise of President Saddam Hussein as a row of handicapped Iraqis listen during a protest outside a UN Development Programme office in Baghdad, Iraq on the 7th anniversary of the Gulf War Friday.

— AP/UNB photo

Iraq threatens to suspend all cooperation with UN inspectors

BAGHDAD, Jan 17: Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein said Saturday that he would suspend cooperation with UN weapons inspectors if UN sanctions against Iraq are not lifted, reports AP.

In a speech marking the seventh anniversary of the Gulf War, Saddam said he would follow recommendations made by Iraq's National Assembly unless the sweeping sanctions imposed on Iraq after it invaded Kuwait in 1990 are removed.

Iraq's National Assembly recommended that Saddam suspend all cooperation with UN weapons inspectors if they don't finish their disarmament activities in Iraq within six months from November 20.

The Security Council has ordered Iraq to destroy its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons as a condition for ending the 1991 Gulf War. UN offi-

cials have reported progress in eliminating the first two, but suspect that Iraq is holding back significant information on biological weapons.

But Saddam, dressed in a green military uniform, said if the inspections do not come to an end, Iraq is ready to "bear the responsibilities for such a position".

There is no way and no alternative to that course," he said.

Saddam criticised the United States for its "aggressive policies toward Iraq" and described Washington as "an arrogant, blind power which sees nothing but its narrow interests."

He urged the administration of US President Bill Clinton to reconsider its policies toward Iraq and bring about an end to the sanctions.

"They should not be disillusioned again that they can achieve now what they have failed to achieve by means of deception and intimidation through military means because they have already tested that on more than one occasion," he said.

Iraq has long been concerned by what it believes is Washington's determination to keep sanctions in place even after Iraq has complied with the UN resolutions on disarmament.

Tension again mounted between Iraq and the United Nations in recent days after Iraq barred a UN team from inspecting sites, saying the group included too many Americans and Britons. Other UN teams have continued their tasks.

The team left Friday but UN officials said the departure was scheduled and did not represent a surrender to Iraqi pressure.

Delay in probe into Bofors scandal

BJP holds Cong (I) responsible

NEW DELHI, Jan 17: BJP Friday hit back at Congress and Sonia Gandhi holding them responsible for delay in investigations into Bofors gun deal pay-offs and blocking the names of recipients of kickbacks while promising to reveal the identities of the beneficiaries within six months of coming to power, reports PTI.

A day after Sonia Gandhi demanded in Bangalore that all Bofors papers should be made public and action taken against

the recipients of the kickbacks, the BJP demanded that Sonia Gandhi should come clean on her family's relations with Italian businessman Ottavio Quattronechi who it said fled India hours before CBI named him as one of the recipients of the alleged kickbacks.

Stating that Bofors was a major corruption issue which led to the defeat of the Rajiv Gandhi government, senior BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee en-

dorsed Sonia Gandhi's demand to make the Bofors papers public and said "no justice is being done to the people by keeping them in dark about the Bofors papers."

Talking to newsmen in Rourkela (Orissa), Vajpayee said the papers should include results of investigations carried out by CBI and other agencies so far. Information received from a Bofors of Sweden and the details of interrogation of Bofors officials.



Shi'ite Muslims shout anti-government slogans and burn tyres after Jumma prayers in Islamabad on Friday.

— AP/UNB photo

Sonia takes electioneering battle into opposition camp

NEW DELHI, Jan 17: The crowds are getting bigger and India's Congress party is more upbeat as its star vote-catcher takes to the campaign trail with gusto ahead of next month's general election, reports India Abroad News Service.

By demanding a big election rally in southern India that authorities lift the lid on the country's most famous and enduring scandal, Sonia Gandhi has taken the battle into the opposition camp to the delight of party workers, political analysts said.

"Sonia came of age," "Sonia dares," Government "Sonia takes bull by the horns," said front page headlines in the dailies yesterday.

"I really feel good that she has taken it straight on. It is time somebody took up the issue of Bofors by the horns. Successive governments have kept it hanging," Congress spokesperson Ambika Soni told IANS.

In a hard-hitting speech yesterday in Bangalore on the second stop of a five-city southern poll campaign tour, Sonia took everyone by surprise when

she lashed out at the slow progress of the Bofors probe in which her assassinated husband, former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, is a central figure.

Her clear stand on the issue has considerably eased the Congress Party's worries about the much talked about Bofors "ghost" again haunting its polls drive, analysts noted. Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government lost the 1989 general election fought by his opponents on an anti-corruption plank inspired by the howitzer gun purchase scandal which surfaced in early 1987.

Sonia Gandhi declared she would be "the happiest person" when authorities revealed the names of the beneficiaries of the paybacks by Swedish arms maker Bofors to clinch the 1.6 billion dollar deal in 1986 with the then Congress government of her husband.

"...because on that day my husband will be vindicated, because on that day it will be proved that this campaign was nothing but a vicious attempt to destroy his reputation," she

said with uncharacteristic aggression.

Kickbacks, said to be between 640 million to two billion rupees (16 to 50 million dollars), are suspected to have been deposited in foreign bank accounts, including in Switzerland, Britain and other places.

Sonia went on: "Six governments have come and gone, five of them from opposition parties, yet the complete truth has still to be revealed. I have often wondered why."

After addressing Congress poll rallies in Hyderabad and Cochin today, Sonia speaks in Goa today before returning to New Delhi. She had kicked off the Congress polls drive in Sriperumbudur in Tamil Nadu near the spot where her husband was killed by a suspected Tamil Tiger suicide bomber at a May 1991 Congress election campaign rally.

About 15,000 people were reported to have listened to her in Sriperumbudur where the Italian-born widow praised the national role of her husband's Nehru-Gandhi family and defended herself from the opposi-

tion charge of being a foreigner trying to decide the country's destiny.

The crowd of Congress supporters had swelled to over 50,000 at the Bangalore rally, newspapers reported. Congress spokesperson Soni claimed that the actual number was three times more. "Lots more people wanted to come (for the rally) but were kept out (by security personnel at the venue)," she said.

Soni dismissed media speculation that Sonia Gandhi is seeking political office. In a front page story analysing her Bangalore speech, The Pioneer newspaper said, "Mrs Sonia Gandhi on Thursday ended the ambiguity about her political ambition. She has finally positioned herself as the (party's) prime ministerial candidate."

The paper quoted unnamed senior Congress leaders as saying that "there cannot be two centres of power in the Congress. The leader of the party is one who has appeal among the masses."

But the Congress asserts that Sonia is only trying to help the

party and has no political ambition. "She had herself clarified after the Sriperumbudur speech that she was not seeking public office," Soni said.

Sonia's decision to campaign for the Congress is reason for worry for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is downplaying the impact she might have on the Congress polls fortunes.

BJP leader K.L. Sharma said that Sonia's criticism of the Bofors probe would not affect his party and should instead worry the United Front (UF) government. "As far as the BJP is concerned, if we come to power, we will bring everything to light," he told IANS.

Sharma said the crowds at Sonia's rallies were no indication of the voter mood and claimed that BJP leaders Atal Behari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani were drawing bigger crowds.

The four-stage election process begins on February 16 and ends on March 7. Results are expected to be clear by the evening of March 10.

BRIEFLY

Hashimoto plans to visit Russia:

Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto plans to visit Russia later this year following up on a scheduled April trip to Tokyo by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Japan's foreign minister said yesterday, Reuters reports from Tokyo.

"There are plans for Prime Minister Hashimoto to visit Russia, this autumn, Keizo Obuchi told a news conference. He did not give a more precise time frame for the visit. Obuchi plans to visit Moscow, possibly next month, in the latest of a series of high level exchanges aimed at bringing the two countries closer to signing a peace treaty by the turn of the century.

Moderate quake shakes Japan:

A moderate earthquake registering 4.1 on the Richter Scale shook Japan's western prefecture of Wakayama early Saturday, the Meteorological Agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

There were no reports of casualties or major property damage from the quake, which occurred at 1:57 am (1757 GMT Friday). The agency said the epicentre was 10 km below sea level off the north of the Ki peninsula, 450 kilometres (280 miles) from Tokyo.

Noted Urdu writer awarded in India:

Renowned Urdu writer Ali Sardar Jafri has been chosen for the prestigious Jnanpeth Award for 1997 for his outstanding contribution to the enrichment of Indian literature, PTI reports from New Delhi.

A decision to this effect was taken by the Jnanpeth Award selection board which met on Friday under the chairmanship of Dr Karan Singh. The award carries a cheque for Rs 2.5 lakh, a citation and a bronze replica of Vagdevi.

29 miners killed in Serbia:

Twenty-nine miners were killed and 19 injured in a fire-damp explosion Friday night in a coal mine in Soko, southeast Serbia, the Interior Ministry announced in Belgrade, AFP reports from Belgrade.

The prisoners will be freed during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which started Dec. 30, Sheikh Humaid bin Rashid al Nuaimi was quoted as saying by the English-language daily. It said al Nuaimi had also ordered that the government pay money owed by prisoners jailed for bad debts.

25 killed in Sierra Leone:

At least 25 civilians have been killed in raids on one of Sierra Leone's main highways, which was strewn with corpses, travellers reaching the capital said Friday some blaming tribal militiamen, AFP reports from Freetown.

Travellers reported seeing the bodies on the road linking Freetown with the West African country's second city, Bo, 170 kilometres (105 miles) east of the capital. "Everybody is frightened to be on the road and if you are there at the wrong time, you are in trouble," said a market trader as she got off a dusty truck.

Huge blood shortage hits India:

A Supreme Court order banning the selling of blood has resulted in a huge shortage in the country's hospitals, a blood bank official said Friday, AP reports from New Delhi.

The Dec 1 Supreme Court order came in response to reports people who sold blood were more likely to carry the virus that causes AIDS than volunteer donors. Divya Lal, national joint secretary of the Indian Association of Blood Banks, said that at 3 million units collected a year, India had already been 3 million units short of its needs. Since the court order, collection dropped another 1.2 million units.

26 killed in Algiers:

At least 26 people have been killed south of Algiers on Thursday Eighteen of them at a fake road block put by Muslim extremists in military uniforms, Independent reported yesterday, AFP reports from Algiers.

At the same time, the bodies of three girls, kidnapped last Sunday in the attack on the village of Sidi Hammed, near Algiers, have been found with their throats cut. The daily El Khabar reported. That attack left at least 100 people dead.

Quake shakes Russia:

An earthquake with a magnitude of 5 hit the thinly populated northeast region of Sakha-Yakutia, but there were no injuries or serious damage, officials said Friday AP reports from Moscow.

Defence minister resigns in Chile: Defence Minister Edmundo Perez Yoma resigned on Friday amid rising tensions between Chile's civilian rulers and the military over former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet's delayed army retirement, Reuters reports from Santiago.

Perez Yoma, one of President Eduardo Frei's closest advisers, had been planning to step down at the end of the month when Pinochet was to retire from his post as army commander-in-chief. "I presented my resignation in November and said I would step down in December," Perez Yoma told reporters.

Arafat amassing support for his plan to salvage ME peace

NABLUS, West Bank, Jan 17: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will travel to Egypt, France and Britain to amass support for his plan to salvage the Mideast peace process, he told his Cabinet on Friday, reports AP.

Before travelling to Washington next week, Arafat said he will meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Monday and then travel to Europe for separate meetings with French President Jacques Chirac and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, a Cabinet statement said.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said Arafat's plan is based on discussions with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Among other things, the plan demands that Israel halt settlement expansion and continue its withdrawal from the West Bank.

Junta forces 2 NLD MPs to resign

BANGKOK, Jan 17: The two members of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) who resigned this month were forced to do so by the country's military regime, an opposition group said today, reports AP.

Myanmar students exiled in Bangkok said in a statement that the two MPs who had won parliamentary seats under the NLD banner in Myanmar's 1990 general elections had been forced to resign from their posts.

The election results were never accepted by the ruling military junta.

Old mom's own amazing story!

LONDON, Jan 17: The 60-year-old woman who gave birth to a baby in November returned to Britain's front pages on Saturday with reports that the baby's father had left her, and that she might have had fertility treatment, reports AP.

Elizabeth Buttle, who lives on a farm in Wales, gave birth to a healthy boy, Joe, on Nov. 20.

When the story came out Thursday, newspapers said she had told the West Wales General Hospital she was 54, but Press Association, the British news agency, said it had confirmed a 1937 birth date for Buttle.

Her partner Peter Rawstron — the baby's father — was variously reported to be 56 or 58, and still married to a woman living nearby.

On Saturday, The Times and The Sun reported that Rawstron had left Buttle and gone back to his wife of 30 years, Vera Rawstron. They said it was believed he opposed a decision by Buttle to sell her story to a Sunday newspaper.

At the end of it's report, the tabloid Sun printed a line advertising Buttle's "own amazing story" to appear exclusively in The News of the World, the Sun's Sunday stablemate.