

Clinton urges Israel, PA to trade gradual withdrawal from WB

WASHINGTON, Jan 23: President Bill Clinton ended a series of meetings with Palestinian and Israeli officials on Thursday, having urged them to trade gradual Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank for tougher Palestinian security actions, reports Reuters.

Clinton held two long meetings with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat on Thursday morning in session with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday, as he sought to break a 10-month stalemate in the Middle East peace process.

The crux of his proposal is for the two sides to carry out the withdrawal and the security actions in small sequential steps to restore trust eroded over the past year by Jewish settlements and Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel.

According to a Palestinian official Clinton told Arafat he wanted Israel to withdraw from at least 10 per cent of the West Bank as part of the deal.

US officials declined to confirm the percentage, but they freely described the proposed process of phasing the Israeli

withdrawal and the Palestinian effort to improve security.

The president emphasised the need for a credible (withdrawal), just as he emphasised with the chairman today the need for a maximum effort on security, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told reporters during a break in the talks.

"We've introduced the concept of parallel processes of implementation of these commitments," she added. "We believe this is a practical way to rebuild confidence that both sides will live up to their obligations under the OSLO agreements."

After months of secret talks in the Norwegian capital, Palestinian and Israeli officials signed a declaration in 1993 that outlined plans for Palestinian self rule in the occupied territories.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, also during a break in the talks quoted Clinton as telling Arafat at their first White House meeting, "I want a credible and significant (Israeli) redeployment. I want two digits."

Erekat did not give the size of the Israeli redeployment Arafat wanted but said Arafat raised the issue with Clinton, the spokesman added. "Clinton responded, I can't get you what you want but I don't accept what Netanyahu offered."

US officials said Arafat, addressing one Israeli concern handed Clinton's a letter spelling out for the first time key details of a 1996 decision to annul parts of a Palestinian Charter that call for Israel's destruction.

US and Palestinian officials said the likely outcome of this week's talks would be that Netanyahu and Arafat reflected for a week or two before US mediation efforts resumed.

"As he did with Prime Minister Netanyahu, the president asked the chairman (Arafat) to take these ideas back for careful consideration a White House spokeswoman said after Clinton's final meeting with Arafat on Thursday evening.

One person familiar with the talks said the main stumbling block was not the percentage of withdrawal but the loss of trust between the two sides.

One Palestinian official suggested the extent of the loss in his assessment of Netanyahu's position.

"The man is not coming to ask for security, the man is coming to use security as a pretext for not doing anything," the Palestinian official said.

Raid on Hamas hideout

AP adds: Palestinian police raided a hideout belonging to the militant Hamas group on Thursday, seizing timers for bombs and a submachine gun, a Palestinian security official said.

Two people were arrested during the raid in the West Bank city of Nablus, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Earlier this month, Palestinian police uncovered a Hamas bomb factory containing almost a ton of explosives. The Palestinians then arrested two Hamas activists and convicted them of building the bombs used in attacks that killed 26 people in Jerusalem last summer.

Bus, van collision leaves 20 dead in Pakistan

LAHORE, Pakistan, Jan 23: At least 20 people were killed and 40 injured when a passenger bus collided with a van in Pakistani Punjab province today, police said, reports AFP.

The condition of 10 of the wounded, who were rushed to hospital, was serious. Police, quoting witnesses, said the packed bus from Sialkot town bordering India was heading towards Narowal, 180 km northwest of here.

Apparently the bus driver lost control due to reckless driving and rammed into the van coming from the opposite direction.

Cracks appear in Great Wall following quake

BEIJING, Jan 23: An earthquake that killed 50 people in north China earlier this month left many cracks in the Great Wall, the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported Thursday, says AP.

The magnitude 6.2 quake on January 10 left cracks in the wall in Shangyi, Zhangbei and Wanquan counties of Hebei province. Xinhua quoted He Yong, director of the Beijing Administration of Cultural Relics, as saying.

The wall in that area was mostly built during the Ming Dynasty, which ruled from 1368 to 1644. About 20 buildings from that period also have cracks from the quake, He said.

The report did not say how serious the cracks were. It quoted He as saying that neither the wall nor the buildings sustained other damage.

All parties agree to ceasefire in Bougainville

CHRISTCHURCH, New Zealand, Jan 23: Leaders from all parties to the Bougainville conflict agreed today to an irrevocable ceasefire on April 30 to end a nine-year secessionist war on the Papua New Guinea island, reports Reuters.

The deal, which builds on an interim truce in place since last October, was struck after five days of peace talks in New Zealand and includes a request for the United Nations Security Council to endorse an extended ceasefire monitoring operation.

His hobby is to lose in elections!

BAREILLY, India, Jan 23: A 63-year-old eccentric Indian whose passion is to fight elections is preparing to jump into the fray once again — with the sole intention of losing, reports AFP.

The greying Kaka Joginder Singh is undeterred by more than 300 defeats he has suffered in a variety of elections since he began contesting in 1962.

"I have had the pleasure of heavily losing elections on more than 300 occasions from 14 of India's 25 states," says Singh at his family home here. "But please vote," he adds, seated on a cot on the verandah, that I never fight elections. I never seek votes. Only criminals contest elections. I only swim in the sea of elections for sheer pleasure.

"I stand as a candidate only to lose. That is my hobby, my life."

Singh, the fourteenth of 16 brothers, and sisters and whose family runs a successful textile business here, is set to plunge into parliamentary elections in February-March.

'Muslims are hurt to see their patriotism questioned by BJP'

NEW DELHI, Jan 23: A prominent Muslim politician was quoted as saying Friday that Muslims were hurt to see their patriotism questioned by India's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party, the party expected to win upcoming parliamentary elections, reports AP.

"After 50 years of independence, the Bharatiya Janata Party is raising questions about the patriotism of Muslims. It is a matter of great sorrow," Najma Heptullah, vice chairman of the upper house of parliament, was quoted as saying in Dainik Jagran, a widely read Hindi-language daily.

Heptullah is a member of the Congress Party, Bharatiya Janata Party's main rival, and grand-daughter of India's most prominent Muslim independence leader, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

Bharatiya Janata recently posted on its website a 1995 article in which party leader and former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was quoted as saying Muslims, who make up about 11 per cent of the population of nearly 1 billion, were more committed to Islam than to India.

The article also said Muslims needed to be "cleansed" and taught to be Indian. The article was widely criticised, and later stripped from the website.

Opinion polls have predicted Bharatiya Janata Party will win the most seats in February-March elections, but not the majority needed to govern without partners.

Meanwhile, a woman who organised campaigns against witch hunts after she was accused of being a witch is running for office in upcoming elections, a newspaper reported Friday.

Ipsita Roy, famous for her 1987-88 campaign against the killing of rural women who were accused of being witches, will run from the western city of Calcutta on the centrist Congress Party ticket, the Indian Express daily reported.

She told the newspaper she would make her campaign against witch hunts one of her main election planks.

Roy was accused of practicing witchcraft when she gained fame in Calcutta for her New Age technique of using crystals to treat people with nervous and mental disorders. That experience led to her interest in the plight of rural women accused of being witches.



President Clinton greets Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in the Oval Office of the White House on Thursday, where the two were to discuss efforts by Arafat to push Israel for more of the West Bank. — AP/UNB photo

Alleged affair with ex-White House intern Investigating prosecutors to subpoena Clinton confidant, secretary

WASHINGTON, Jan 23: With former White House intern Monica Lewinsky spared questioning for now, Whitewater prosecutors looking into whether President Bill Clinton had an affair and tried to cover it up are subpoenaing a long-time Clinton confidant and an Oval Office secretary, reports AP.

Whitewater prosecutors have tape recordings suggesting that Lewinsky, concerned she was about to be questioned in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case against the president, talked to Clinton in December and was hooked up with Vernon Jordan to find a lawyer and a new job, lawyers familiar with the tapes said.

Jordan said Thursday only that Lewinsky was referred by Clinton's personal secretary, Betty Currie, and made no mention of whether the president or other White House officials were involved. Jordan and Currie were both subpoenaed in the Whitewater probe.

A Clinton administration official said "we are not denying that the White House had a role in encouraging Jordan to do what he did," but the official declined to say who provided the impetus, whether it was Clinton, his personal secretary or other presidential aides.

Jordan gave Clinton a boost on Thursday, telling reporters that Lewinsky, 24, told him "she didn't have a sexual relationship with the president."

But Jordan gave no explanation of why such a topic would have come up in the first place between him and Lewinsky.

Vice President Al Gore told a group of newspaper columnists in his office that he believed the president's denials and that Clinton would "cooperate fully" with the Whitewater independent counsel, Kenneth Starr. The Washington Post reported

in today's editions.

Lewinsky received an indefinite reprieve in having to decide whether to stand by her earlier assertion in an affidavit to Jones's attorneys that she did not have an affair with Clinton, take the Fifth Amendment or change her story.

US District Judge Susan Webber Wright in Little Rock, Arkansas, postponed a deposition that had been scheduled Friday for Lewinsky to be questioned under oath by Jones' lawyers.

Still to be determined was whether Whitewater investigators and Lewinsky would make a deal — a grant of immunity from prosecution in exchange for her story.

FBI agents working for Starr were contacting other interns, including some who apparently still work at the White House, according to officials.

Jesuit teacher says

Fidel was a religious boy

GIJON, Spain, Jan 23: Cuban leader Fidel Castro changed after his Catholic education, but he has many of the same concerns as the pope, a Spanish priest said Thursday while reminiscing about his most famous pupil, reports AP.

"He was a religious boy. He changed afterwards, but I don't believe he is an atheist," Jesuit priest Jose Maria Patac told the news agency EFE from his home in northern Spain on occasion of Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba.

The octogenarian priest taught the future leader of the Cuban revolution and his two brothers Ramon and Raul in a Jesuit School on the island 60 years ago.

Patac recalled how the adolescent Castro prayed frequently and attended all the normal religious activities organised by the school in Santiago de Cuba.



Pope John Paul II shakes hands with Cuban President Fidel Castro at the Palace of the Revolution prior to their private meeting in Havana Thursday. The pope is on a historic five-day visit to the communist nation. — AP/UNB photo

Endeavour blasts off for Mir

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida, Jan 23: Space shuttle Endeavour thundered into the night Thursday on a flight to take one last American to live aboard the Russian space station Mir, reports AP.

Thick, dark clouds that had hovered over the launch site throughout the afternoon were gone by the time Endeavour and its crew of seven rocketed away at 0248 GMT, right on time. The shuttle resembled a bright comet as it streaked up the East Coast toward orbit.

John Glenn, NASA's newest astronaut, watched the launch as preparation for his own shuttle flight this fall.

"It couldn't get any better than that. I wish I was on that flight," said the exuberant senator from Ohio.

Mir's next astronaut, Andrew Thomas, was the main attraction — for this mission anyway. "Good luck, Andy!" well-wishers shouted when he headed to the pad.

Thomas, a 46-year-old Australian-born engineer, will replace David Wolf aboard the space station. Endeavour is due at Mir on Saturday.

At the moment of Endeavour's liftoff, Mir was soaring

over the North Atlantic — 4,500 miles (7,200 kilometres) away — on its 68,136th swing around the world. Wolf and his two Russian crewmates were said to be asleep.

"We begin '98 sending our last astronaut for his stay on Mir," a launch controller said just before launch. "We're going to howl for the Wolfman."

The only snag during the final stage of the countdown was a computer crash that erased some data in launch control; all the lost data had to be reloaded. There was more computer trouble after Endeavour reached orbit; one of the main shuttle computers malfunctioned but wasn't expected to pose any threat.

Although Wolf's four-month stint was calm compared with his predecessors' hair-raising adventures, he admits it was tough at times.

"He's in for the experience of his life," Wolf said of Thomas. "It will be hard. There's no question."

To ease the high temperatures on Mir, Endeavour will drop off a new air conditioner during the five days of linked flight.

Botha appears in court before black judge

GEORGE, South Africa, Jan 23: Former President PW Botha, living the hard-line apartheid leader, appeared before a black judge Friday on charges of defying South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, reports AP.

After a short court session, Judge Victor Lugao postponed the case until February 23, when Botha will be asked to submit a plea to a contempt charge for ignoring a subpoena to testify in person before the commission investigating apartheid-era political crimes.

Dressed in a dark suit and walking with the aid of a

wooden stick, Botha, 82, was accompanied by fiancée Reinette Te Water Naude and member of his family when he arrived at the court.

Known as the "Big Crocodile" for his bullying and sometimes ruthless manner, Botha's appearance before Lugao symbolised change in South Africa since the nation's first all-race election in 1994.

Police constructed a wall of razor-wire seven feet (two metres) high around the building in George, a coastal town 400 kilometres (240 miles) east of Cape Town near where Botha, 82, lives in retirement.

Vietnam ends border talks with China amid tensions

HANOI, Jan 23: One day after concluding a round of border talks with China, Vietnam on Friday issued a hard-hitting treatise that accused China of "land-grabbing" along the northern frontier, reports AP.

Vietnam has accused China of building a landfill jetty along the Dong Mo River that divides the Chinese region of Guangxi and Vietnam's Quang Ninh province.

The jetty, Vietnam says, alters existing demarcation lines into Vietnamese territory by 8 metres (26 feet) along a one-kilometre (0.62 metre) stretch, the Communist Party newspaper, The People, reported.

Although a seemingly minor infraction, emotions along the tense border run high.

"Chinese builders took ad-

vantage of Vietnam's customary friendship and unilaterally changed the border," villager Nguyen Thang was quoted as saying by the official government mouthpiece Vietnam News Agency.

The continued construction is regarded as a sheer Chinese provocation, the report said.

When completed, the jetty will divert the water flow toward the Vietnamese river bank, causing intensive soil erosion, the report said.

The news agency on Friday published a rambling and at times scathing 900-word treatise against China — a startlingly hard-hitting critique of Vietnam's looming neighbour to the north.

The border talks, which ended Thursday, were part of ongoing negotiations

UNSC divided in assessing Iraq's N-potential

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 23: The UN Security Council was divided Thursday in assessing Iraq's nuclear potential on the eve of a briefing by the top UN weapons inspector on failed Baghdad talks, reports AFP.

Following a council briefing by an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) expert, the United States and Britain blocked an attempt by Russia, China and France to Declare Iraq free of nuclear weapons.

The stand reflected the traditional division among the five permanent members regarding Iraq.

The United States and Britain adopt a tough line to protest Iraq's defiance of the UN weapons inspectors, who have been barred from visiting certain Iraqi sites since last October.

China, France and Russia want to encourage Iraq to comply with UN resolutions requiring the verified destruction of all Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

"We believe the remaining

issues in the nuclear field have been solved," said Chinese Ambassador Qiu Huasun after hearing Thursday's briefing by IAEA expert Garry Dillon, who visited Iraq on December 19-21 seeking further clarifications on Iraq's nuclear potential.

"The nuclear file should be closed," Qiu added.

"That view was echoed by Russian Ambassador Sergei Lavrov who said Dillon's briefing on a January 14 IAEA report confirmed our conviction that the (nuclear) file is closed for all practical purposes."

However, US Ambassador Bill Richardson said: "We don't see any reason to close the nuclear files because there are significant gaps in our judgement, that have been described today by the IAEA."

He accused Iraq of continuing to conceal information and "lack of cooperation," with the inspectors on the nuclear issue.

AP adds: China said Thursday the Security Council should close the International Atomic Energy Agency's file on Iraq's

nuclear weapons programme Chinese UN Ambassador Huasun said.

"We believe that the remaining issues in the nuclear field have been basically solved," Ambassador Qiu Huasun told reporters after the council was briefed by the IAEA's team leader in Iraq, Gary Dillon.

"It is time to close the nuclear file," Qiu said. "We fully agree that at this stage (the) IAEA should focus on the implementation and strengthening of its ongoing monitoring and verification plan."

He said China believed "that Iraq should implement fully relevant resolutions of the council. At the same time, the council should also give timely and objective evaluation at the progress so far made."

Russia also supports closing the file.

Even with the support of China and Russia, most Security Council members are not ready to say that Iraq's nuclear weapons programmes has been dismantled, diplomats said.

Off the Record

Churchill's cigar to aid cancer victims!

LONDON: A cigar which once belonged to Winston Churchill is to be auctioned next month to aid cancer sufferers exactly 54 years after it first went on the block, reports AFP.

The cigar, the trademark of Britain's wartime prime minister, was originally auctioned on February 4, 1994 to aid Russian victims of Nazi Germany.

It is expected to fetch at least 500 pounds (800 dollars) the second time around.

"Winston Churchill's name is famous throughout the world and you never see a picture of him without his trademark Havana," auctioneer Martin Lambert said.

"It really is a little bit of history."

The cigar was sent for auction after an anonymous donor offered it to the syde ryder home at Cheltenham in Western England which cares for 100 cancer sufferers.

It is wonderful to think that this cigar is still helping people 50 years after it was originally sold for a good cause a spokesman for the home said.

For those who lose loved ones to suicide...

KANSAS CITY, Missouri: Hallmark Cards Inc. is making a sympathy card for those who lose someone to suicide, expanding the company's collection of death and illness-related cards, reports AP.

The card, the first in a possible line, is to be released in April.

Hallmark is the US greeting card industry leader with 44 per cent of the market share.

Hallmark's Lifesong collection, which includes the card, celebrates all experiences, beautiful and painful, company spokeswoman Rachel Bolton said Wednesday.

"There was a resounding response for this kind of card, cards that deal with death and dying and spirituality," she said. Hallmark tested the idea for a suicide condolence card in at least six cities and received an overwhelmingly positive response, she said. One woman said none of the cards she received after her husband's suicide showed that people knew or understood the loss.

"What these cards do is they open the door to communication," Bolton said. "The challenge is to educate people about what it means to lose someone like this."



Taliban fighters check their RPG7 in the front-line 20 km north of Kabul on Thursday. The Taliban leadership has agreed to accept a peace settlement reached by religious scholars appointed by all sides in the conflict. — AP/UNB photo