

Jyoti Basu's plea to save India from disunity

CALCUTTA, Jan 24: West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu yesterday launched a scathing attack against divisive forces and appealed to the people to "identify friends and enemies" to save the country from being further divided on caste and communal lines, reports PTI.

With independence, the British gave us a truncated India taking advantage of communal emotions prevailing then. In that, we have been defeated by the British. We will not let this country be divided further," Basu said after unveiling a statue of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose at Salt Lake near here.

The chief minister, who attended the function with permission from the election commission, said, "Let us decide what kind of India we all want — is it the same India Netaji wanted. If we want Netaji's India, efforts by leaders only is not enough. The people will have to realise their role, they will have to identify friends and enemies."

Chirac in India for 3-day visit

BOMBAY, Jan 24: French President Jacques Chirac arrived here this morning for a three-day state visit to India, reports AFP.

Chirac's plane landed in Bombay at 9:00 am (0300 GMT) and the French president was welcomed by Maharashtra state Governor PC Alexander.

His visit is the first to India by a French head of state since Francois Mitterrand came here in 1989.

India, Nepal yet to reach accord on water-sharing

KATHMANDU, Jan 24: Talks between Indian and Nepal ended here yesterday without reaching agreement on the sharing of water from the Mahakali River, official sources said, reports AFP.

An Indian delegation led by the Secretary of the Central Water Resources Ministry, Mati Prasad, has been here since Tuesday for the meeting with his Nepalese counterpart Dwarika Nath Dhungel.

Although no agreement was reached, the two secretaries decided to instruct the joint group of experts of Nepal and India to meet at the earliest date so as to expedite the progress to finalise a water sharing agreement, the sources added.

Lewinsky likely to be indicted

Clinton assures Cabinet of his innocence

WASHINGTON, Jan 24: Fighting scandal allegations, President Bill Clinton assured his Cabinet he is innocent and urged them to concentrate on their jobs, reports UNB.

"I'm going to be fine and you will be, too," he declared on Friday.

Clinton summoned department chiefs for a preview of Tuesday's State of the Union address but felt he also had to address the startling accusations that he had an affair with a young intern, Monica Lewinsky, and then urged her to lie about it.

"The president started out by saying that the allegations are untrue, that we should stay focused on our jobs and that he will be fine," US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said later.

Stressing Clinton's directions, Albright said, "The American people would be ill served if the president of the United States and his Cabinet did not focus on what we have been asked to do or he has been elected to do."

New polls for CNN/Time and Fox TV indicated the Lewinsky matter was taking a sharp toll, with Clinton's approval ratings dropping 10 points to 49 per cent.

Nonetheless, a White House official said the president had decided not to address questions before Tuesday's State of the Union address, giving aides time to examine documents subpoenaed by Whitewater prosecutor Kenneth Starr.

Meanwhile, with intense legal pressure bearing down on Lewinsky, Whitewater prosecutors alerted her attorney that the former White House intern is an investigative target likely to be indicted.

The Associated Press learned that prosecutors were arranging a break-the-ice discussion with Lewinsky's attorney, William Ginsburg, four days after negotiations over a possible immunity deal broke down.

Lawyers and others familiar with the contents of taped conversations now in the hands of Whitewater prosecutors said Lewinsky told her friend Linda Tripp that she performed oral sex on Clinton numerous times. The sources, insisting on anonymity, said Lewinsky asserts on the tapes that Clinton had been seen with at least four other women, three of whom worked at the White House, and that she was angry about it.

Clinton has emphatically denied having a sexual relationship with Lewinsky. She also has denied that the relationship was sexual in an affidavit for Paula Jones' attorneys.

Mission to UN subpoenaed for documents

AFP adds: US Ambassador Bill Richardson and the US Mission to the United Nations have been asked to provide documents to investigators after offering a job to Monica Lewinsky.

Richardson's spokesman Calvin Mitchell said Friday that "the independent counsel has issued subpoenas to the US mission and the office of Ambassador Richardson to produce documents in relation to the Lewinsky matter."

Mitchell said that the mission intends to cooperate fully with the request but declined further comment.

Richardson's office revealed on Wednesday that he had offered Lewinsky a junior public affairs job at the US mission in October last year, an offer she turned down.

US embargo on Cuba deplorable, says Pope

CAMAGUEY, Cuba, Jan 24: Pope John Paul II, in a clear and outspoken attack on the US embargo on Cuba, said on Friday such measures were "deplorable," reports Reuter.

In a letter to Cuban youth released at a mass in this central city, the pontiff said: "economic embargoes... are always deplorable because they hurt the most needy."

The Pope has long opposed all economic embargoes and has previously criticized the 35-year-old US measure against Havana, aimed at forcing political change in the communist island 90 miles (145 km) from Florida.

Speaking on the plane bringing him to Cuba on Wednesday, the pontiff said he wanted Washington to "change" the embargo. A Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said on Friday Pope would speak out clearly against it again before the end of his five-day tour.



Pope John Paul II and Cuban President Fidel Castro shake hands after a meeting with intellectuals at the University of Havana Jan 23. — AFP/UNB photo

Man convicted of threatening to assassinate Clinton

TAMPA, Florida, Jan 24: A former Secret Service informant was convicted of threatening to assassinate President Bill Clinton, reports AP.

Zsolt Sass, 34, has been in jail since September when his girlfriend filed a domestic violence complaint against him and told police he had threatened numerous times to kill Clinton.

Sass is an illegal German immigrant who has used a variety of Social Security numbers — including Elvis Presley's. He also donated \$1,000 to the Republican National Committee in 1996, according to the Federal Elections Commission.

When officials searched his car, they found five handguns, two rifles, 250 rounds of ammunition and eight knives.

33 more killed in Algeria

ALGIERS, Jan 24: A wave of bomb attacks and massacres by suspected Islamist militants across Algeria in the past few days have left at least 33 civilians dead, independent newspapers reported today, says AFP.

Counter operations by Algerian security forces claimed the lives of 19 armed extremists, the reports said.

Bombs went off in Algiers, Setif and Blida on Friday, killing eight people and injuring 16, as Algeria went into the last weekend of its deadliest Ramadan since an Islamic insurgency erupted six years ago. Initial tolls and put the number of dead to four.

Khatami still wants detente with US

TEHRAN, Jan 24: President Mohammad Khatami has not retreated from his overture to the United States, despite a recent speech in which he flayed Washington and said Iran did not need relations with it, Iran's foreign minister was quoted as saying, reports AP.

Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi said Iran still wanted relations based on "detente and mutual interests" with the United States, the English-language Tehran Times reported Saturday.

Khatami, a moderate cleric who took office in August, broke with nearly two decades of hostility and called for cultural exchanges with the United States in a Cable News Network interview last month.

But on Monday, in a speech at the shrine of late revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, he said Iranians do "not need the United States to come close to us."

Top general blasts Suu Kyi for criticising edn system

YANGON, Jan 24: A top general in Myanmar's military government has accused the opposition led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi of unfairly criticising the educational system, official newspapers reported Saturday, reports AP.

Gen. Khin Nyunt, a leader in the ruling State Peace and Development Council, cited recent prizes won by Burmese students for essays and posters at Association of Southeast Asian Nations competitions as proof the opposition was wrong.

Speaking at Friday's closing ceremony of a refresher course for 1,500 teachers near Yangon, Khin Nyunt said "internal ax-handling, when meeting foreign visitors, tried to discredit the country" by belittling the education system.

The term "ax-handle" refers to Burmese government contents are working in collusion with foreign powers — the ax — to cut down Myanmar's independence and national development.

Khin Nyunt, the powerful head of military intelligence, urged teachers to safeguard the minds of students against the opposition.

Israel's offer of limited pullout from WB unacceptable: Arafat

WASHINGTON, Jan 24: Yasser Arafat wound up his talks in Washington rejecting as "peanuts" an Israeli offer for a limited pullback on the West Bank and praising President Bill Clinton's endorsement of Palestinian aspirations, reports AP.

"We cannot accept it," Arafat said angrily of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's offer to cede only up to 10 per cent of the territory and that only if the Palestinian Authority took tougher actions against terrorists.

Arafat has turned over Gaza and 27 per cent of the West Bank to the Palestinians. On Thursday, Arafat demanded an additional 60 per cent. Netanyahu said that ceding more land would expose Israel to attack and that it would be "suicidal."

On Friday, Arafat accused Netanyahu of widespread violations of Israel's agreements with the Palestinian Authority, but said he was going home hopeful "we can break the deadlock" in Mideast negotiations.

Clinton's statement Thursday supporting Palestinian aspirations "to live as a free people" gave Arafat a boost.

"I think this is a very important declaration of President Clinton," the Palestinian leader said. "I think what President Clinton declared is very clear."

While Clinton did not specifically endorse the Palestinian state Arafat aspires to set up on the West Bank, with its capital in Jerusalem, the carefully prepared phrase differed from previous US constructions.

And Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, at a news conference Friday, said Clinton's intention was to show Arafat "his understanding of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people."

Told that Arafat's aides were saying this brought the United States closer to endorsing the idea of a Palestinian state, Albright said: "What you hear and what you see is what it means. And that is what the president meant, it is that he believes that the Palestinian people have that aspiration and it should be respected."

The State Department spokesman, James Rubin, said later that it was up to Israel and the Palestinians to take up the statehood issue in their negotiations, and that declaring a US position now would be "premature."

The statements by Clinton and Albright on Palestinian aspirations were only on indication the administration was expanding its role in the stalled Mideast peace process.

The next move in the Mideast peace quest will probably be talks in Europe between

Netanyahu and Arafat, brokered by Albright. She insisted again Thursday on a sizable and credible Israeli pullback on the West Bank.

Declaring that remained her position, Albright confirmed that Clinton had decided on a strategy of urging a phased Israeli troop withdrawal timed to Palestinian actions against terrorism.

"From our perspective, we think that what has happened here is that the president laid out a reasonable way to try to bridge the gaps that have existed there, and a way to get the peace process back on track," Albright said Friday. "We have made some suggestions."

Arafat, at his news conference, minimised the US initiatives. "So far, we haven't heard any specific proposals," he said. He also denied that his frequent public calls for a "jihad" meant he was urging a holy war against Israel. "You have to understand our terminology and our Arabic language," Arafat said.

"It's a call for establishing a Palestinian state," he said.

Launching into an attack on Netanyahu, the Palestinian leader said Netanyahu was bent on populating Arab neighbourhoods and the West Bank with Jewish settlers while not implementing a promise to free Palestinian prisoners.

UNSC rejects Iraq's proposal for moratorium on arms monitoring

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 24: The UN Security Council on Friday rejected as "unacceptable" Iraq's proposal for a moratorium on UN weapons inspections, council president Alain Dejammet said, reports AP.

Dejammet, the French ambassador, said after top UN weapons inspector Richard Butler briefed the council that the general view was expressed that the idea of a moratorium in unacceptable.

However, Western diplomats said that at Friday's meeting, there was no discussion of the form or the substance of a formal Security Council reaction to Iraq's apparent policy decision to end cooperation with the UN inspectors.

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz informed Butler at meetings earlier this week that Iraq wanted to freeze discussions of access to so-called presidential sites effectively until April.

The Security Council has repeatedly demanded full and unconditional access to all sites for the inspectors monitoring the dismantling of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Dejammet said that following consultations with capitals in the coming days, the 15-

member Security Council aimed "to adopt a unanimous reaction aimed at the implementation of the Security Council resolutions."

Western diplomats said that US President Bill Clinton, who has refused to rule out military force, would call the main players over the weekend.

Some diplomats suggested that Clinton's presidency had been weakened by a sex and perjury scandal, which could have an impact on the UN Security Council discussions on Iraq.

US Ambassador Bill Richardson, whose office was asked to provide documents to investigators on Friday in connection to the scandal involving former White House intern Monica Lewinsky, refused to comment on the affair's possible impact.

"We want to resolve this diplomatically, but we are not ruling any option out," he said.

"As the president said, something is going to give in this situation sooner or later" US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told reporters in Washington.

But Russian Ambassador Sergei Lavrov stressed Moscow's continued opposition to the use of force, which he said could lead to the loss of UN dis-

armament monitoring in Iraq, and the possible "disruption of relations between Iraq and the UN."

Lavrov said there was a need "to rely entirely on diplomatic efforts, to be patient and to keep searching for diplomatic solutions for the full solution of the problem of access."

China is also opposed to military action against Iraq, and Western diplomats said they detected a hardening of the Chinese position in that sense.

Chinese Ambassador Qin Huasun stressed the need for patience in dealing with Iraq to ensure the fulfilment of UN disarmament requirements.

In a significant shift, France on Friday publicly rejected the Iraqi proposals for a moratorium on weapons inspections of certain sites.

France, along with Russia and China, has notably backed Iraqi calls to dilute the US and British presence in the special commission responsible for Iraq disarmament.

Western diplomats here said that France would now back possible US and British proposals declaring Iraq in "material breach" of UN resolutions, which would lay the legal groundwork for military action.



United Nations chief weapons inspector Richard Butler, left, meets with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan at the United Nations Friday. Accusing Iraq of "grave" attempts to mislead arms inspectors, Butler said that new Iraqi conditions on access to key sites may prevent his teams from ever learning the truth about Iraq's banned weapons programmes. — AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Avalanche kills 11 in France:

Eleven members of a high-school snowshoe expedition died Friday and 15 were injured in the deadliest avalanche to hit the French Alps in many years, local authorities said, AFP reports from Les Orres, France.

The party was swept away and buried under the masses of snow or smashed into trees further down a steep slope, rescue workers said.

Thai finance minister meets Clinton: Thailand's finance minister, Tarrin Nimmanahaeminda, capped a three-day visit to the United States with a short meeting Friday with President Bill Clinton, AP reports from Washington.

Tarrin's visit centred around the International Monetary Fund's 17.2 billion dollars bailout and whether that amount is sufficient to work out its financial crisis and prop up its sagging currency. White House spokesman Mike McCurry gave no details of their discussion.

89 criminals executed in China:

Eighty-nine criminals were executed "recently" in Beijing in 12 separate sessions, the Shenghuo Shibao daily reported yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

It said they were executed for crimes including armed robbery, murder and aggravated assault. The executions constituted "a guarantee given at all levels of the Beijing justice system to assure Beijing residents of a stable and peaceful Lunar new year" starting January 28, it said.

Czech ultra-right leader Sladek freed:

Czech ultra-right leader Miroslav Sladek, was freed from jail on Friday after spending 17 days in remand on charges of spreading national hatred, his Republican Party (SPR-RSC) said, Reuter reports from Prague.

"He was not only released but was also acquitted fully," party spokesman Jan Vix told news agency.

1 shot dead in Belfast:

A man was shot dead on Friday just hours after one of Northern Ireland's pro-British guerrilla groups said it was ending hostilities against Irish nationalists, Reuter reports from Belfast.

The victim was shot in the head while laying gas pipes on a road in a Protestant district close to the Roman Catholic Ardoyne district of north Belfast. He died later in hospital of his wounds.

Gunmen kill 8 farmers in Colombia:

Gunmen bearing a list pulled eight peasant farmers from their homes on Friday and shot them to death at close range as their families looked on, police said, AP reports from Bogota.

The farmers were killed on the outskirts of Chaparral, a town 90 miles (145 kilometres) southeast of the capital, Bogota, said Col. Luis Alberto Gomez, the local police commander. Some 20 gunmen took part.

Gomez said police believe the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the nation's largest and oldest rebel band, was responsible. Witnesses quoted the gunmen as accusing the victims of collaborating with the army.

Quake hits western Japan:

An earthquake measuring 3.9 on the Richter scale hit western Japan early Saturday, but there were no reports of damage or casualties, the Meteorological Agency and police said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The epicentre of the quake, which struck at 6:32 am. (2132 GMT Friday), was located under the sea between Shikoku Island and Kii Peninsula, some 500 kilometres (310 miles) west of Tokyo, an agency spokesman said.

Natural disasters claim 3,200 in China:

Natural disasters killed 3,200 people across China last year and caused economic losses of 1975 billion yuan (24 billion dollars), the official China Daily reported Saturday. AP reports from Beijing.

Earthquakes and a summer drought that ruined harvests did the greatest harm, the newspaper said quoting Li Bengong, a disaster relief official in the Civil Affairs Ministry.

Security tightened at US missions

Pakistani sentenced to death for CIA ambush

FAIRFAX, Virginia, Jan 24: A Pakistani was sentenced to death Friday for gunning down two CIA employees outside the gates of the spy agency, reports AP.

"I don't expect any justice or mercy from your country or this court," Mir Aimal Kasi, 33, told Circuit Judge J. Howe Brown in his first statement since his arrest last June. The ambush was "the result of a wrong policy toward Muslim countries," he said in a low voice.

The jury that convicted Kasi of murder on November 10 rec-

ommended the death penalty. In Virginia, judges usually abide by a jury's decision.

Meanwhile, armoured personnel carrier was parked outside the US Consulate in the southern port city on Saturday, one day after Pakistani Mir Aimal Kasi was sentenced to death for killing two CIA workers in the US.

Security has been tight at US missions since last November, when a Fairfax County jury convicted Kasi of capital murder and recommended the death penalty.

'Al-Quds Day' rallies in Pak cities

Muslim states urged to liberate Jerusalem

ISLAMABAD, Jan 24: Religious parties staged demonstrations at major Pakistani cities Friday, condemning Israeli occupation of Jerusalem and urging Muslim states to struggle unitedly to liberate the holy city, reports AP.

Hundreds of people marched in processions in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi and other places under the banner of multi-party Milli Yekjehti Council (MYC) and pro-Iran Shi'ite Tehreek-e-Jafarida, Pakistan, witnesses said.

The "Al-Quds (Jerusalem) Day" is observed by religious parties every year on the last Friday of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan to show solidarity with the people of

Palestine.

The demonstrators shouted slogans denouncing the United States for its support to Israel, torching effigies of President Bill Clinton in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad.

Around 1,000 people paraded through the streets in Lahore, capital of Punjab, chanting slogans against Israel and the United States.

Groups of people held demonstrations in several areas in Karachi, the largest Pakistani city.

Addressing a gathering in Karachi, a TJP leader Allama Hasan Turabi said the Muslim states must launch a united struggle to liberate the holy city.

Lankan air force destroys 6 LTTE boats

COLOMBO, Jan 24: The air force destroyed six Tamil Tiger boats seeking to undermine the first local elections in the northern Jaffna later this month after a gap of 14 years, a Defence Ministry official said Saturday, reports AP.

Unmanned surveillance aircraft spotted the boats of the Mullaitivu lagoon on Thursday night. Two Israeli-built Kfir aircraft damaged them 280 kilometres (170 miles) northeast of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, the official said on condition of anonymity.

Other details were not available. There was no comment from the guerrillas.

A few hours later on Friday, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam attacked its Tamil rivals who have defied their warning

against contesting the elections. The rebels shot and killed eight activists of the Eelam People's Democratic Party and lost five of their fighters in a gunbattle in Jaffna area. The EPDP has decided to contest the local council elections.

The Jaffna Peninsula, which served as the rebel stronghold for several years, was captured by the military in 1996.

The government hopes that the local elections will isolate the rebels and bring most Tamil people back into the national mainstream.

The Tiger rebels have been fighting for a separate homeland since 1983. The LTTE accuses the Sinhalese majority of widespread discrimination against minority Tamils in education and jobs.