

International

Tigers attack military camps

Independence celebrations moved from bomb-scarred Kandy

COLOMBO, Jan 28: The Sri Lankan government has decided to move the independence anniversary celebrations out from Kandy where suicide bombers raided the main ceremony site killing 16 people, a government spokesman said Wednesday, reports AP.

"New the celebrations will be held in Colombo," said Kusum Rodrigo, a spokeswoman for the Government's Information Department.

Prince Charles of Britain is scheduled to take part in the celebrations next week. Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, was a British colony until 1948. "We are working out details of celebrations in Colombo," Mrs. Rodrigo said, but declined to say if Prince Charles was coming.

Sunday's bombing in Kandy was blamed on Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Rebels among Sri Lanka's 3.4 million Tamil minority started a war for an independent homeland in 1983 and the campaign is led by the LTTE.

Reuter adds, at least seven Sri Lankan soldiers were killed and 11 wounded when Tamil Tiger rebels attacked three military camps in the east, military officials said today.

They said the rebels concentrated their attacks on one military detachment at Vakaneri, but simultaneously fired mortars and automatic weapons at the Valaichenai brigade headquarters and another detachment in eastern Batticaloa district late on Tuesday.

The soldiers who were killed or wounded were all at Vakaneri, the officials said.

Troops launched a search for rebels, but there were no immediate details of any rebel casualties, the officials added. The area is about 225 km (140 miles) east of the capital Colombo.

The attacks came a day after the government formally outlawed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which it has blamed for Sunday blast at Sri Lanka's holiest Buddhist shrine in the central town of Kandy.

The truck bomb attack killed 16 people and wounded 23.

LTTE has been fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east. The government says more than 50,000 people have been killed while the LTTE say the toll is higher.

Palestinian cabinet calls for 'mass mobilisation'

Arafat rejects US proposal for gradual Israeli pullback from WB

GAZA, Jan 28: Yasser Arafat on Tuesday rejected a US proposal for a gradual Israeli pullback from the West Bank and his cabinet called on Palestinians to take to the streets for peaceful protests against Israel, reports Reuter.

The Palestinian President convened his self-rule authority on his return from a tour of European and Arab states where he was trying to garner support for the PLO's demands that Israel implement withdrawals outlined in peace deals since 1993.

Asked if he agreed to a phased withdrawal, Arafat told reporters in Gaza: "Definitely not."

US President Bill Clinton has proposed that the Israeli troop withdrawal takes place in phases, with each step matched by a new Palestinian action to improve security.

Netanyahu said on Monday he was considering the US plan. "We have not ruled out a possible staggered interim pullback. The Palestinians must fulfil part of their commitments and they will receive a certain part of land," he said.

Israel said the issue at stake

was Palestinian compliance with peace accords and not how Israel would implement its side of the bargain.

"Palestinian fulfilment of their agreements is at the heart of the US proposal and therefore Chairman Arafat has to address himself not to the mechanism and technical aspects but to finally honour signed agreements," Israeli government spokesman Moshe Fogel told Reuters.

Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met separately with Clinton in Washington last week to try to end the deadlock.

The United States said on Monday it believed both Israel and the Palestinians had accepted its proposal to advance peacemaking, even though they still differed on basic issues.

Palestinians have said they want Israel to pull back from at least 30 per cent of the disputed area, but Israeli news reports indicate Netanyahu refuses to go beyond 9.5 per cent.

The United States, which has called on Israel to carry out a "significant and credible" troop withdrawal, has urged the

sides to meet halfway.

Arafat's cabinet slammed Jewish settlement building in the West Bank and called for "mass mobilisation" against Israel.

"We call upon our people to hold peaceful demonstrations against this policy of robbery of Palestinian land," said Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, detailing to reporters one of the cabinet's decisions.

He said the Palestinians would never accept anything less than what was outlined in Israel-PLO peace deals. He said the US administration did not accept Netanyahu's proposal.

In another sign of growing Arab impatience at Israel, senior PLO officials Nabil Shaath told reporters Arab states had agreed in principle to hold a summit to discuss the 10-month impasse in peacemaking.

"All Arab states adopt the idea of an Arab Summit in order to assert Palestinian rights, Arab diplomatic activity will lead to an Arab Summit but what is under discussion now is the mechanism — will there be an expanded or a mini-sum-

mit?" Shaath told reporters in Gaza.

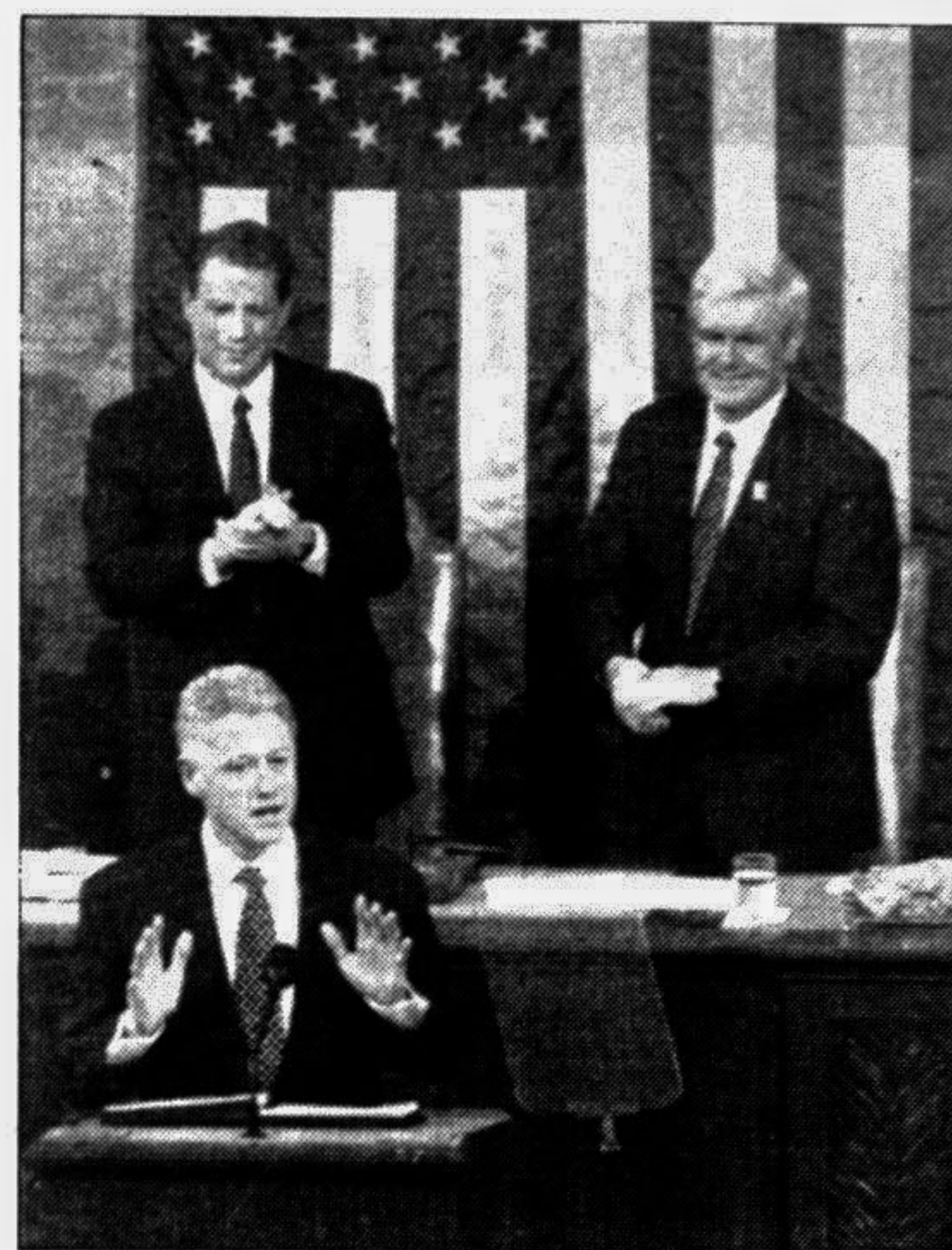
The summit would be the first since 1996, when Arab leaders gathered in Cairo to discuss the prospects of peace after Netanyahu's election victory.

The next step will witness a widespread Arab and European diplomatic flurry of activity," said Shaath, adding that Arab leaders may hold a separate mini-summit with their European counterparts.

Palestinians and other Arabs have looked to the European Union to offset that they see as US bias towards Israel. Fogel said an Arab Summit to discuss faltering peace efforts would violate PLO-Israeli peace accords.

"The Oslo Accords, which the Palestinians of course signed, have their own mechanisms for settling outstanding issues and therefore to go outside those mechanisms is contravention of those accords," Fogel said.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair urged Israel in remarks published on Tuesday to stop building Jewish settlements on Arab lands and to implement other commitments to the Palestinians without delay.



President Clinton delivers his State of the Union speech Tuesday night, in Washington, as Vice President Al Gore and House Speaker Newt Gingrich look on.

—AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Crime rate down in Russia: Despite an overall drop in crime of 9 per cent last year, Russia has seen a sharp rise in serious crimes such as contract murders and kidnappings, the nation's top crime fighter said Tuesday, AP reports from Moscow.

Street crime fell by 13 per cent and robberies plunged by 8 per cent, Interior Minister Anatoly Kulikov said at a news conference.

Russian soldiers kill 7 comrades: In a second deadly incident in two days, a Russian soldier on guard duty in the Far East went on a rampage Tuesday, killing seven and injuring one of his comrades, military officials said, AP reports from Moscow.

The soldier, Pvt Oleg Naumov, was detained shortly after the shooting in the settlement of Pobedino, according to military officials quoted by the Interfax news agency. Naumov hit one soldier with an axe, injuring him, shot dead his commander and another serviceman at his guard post and killed five more soldiers at his unit's canteen and rest room, the report said.

Blast kills Lebanese: A Lebanese civilian was killed in a bomb blast in South Lebanon yesterday, the Israeli-allied South Lebanon Army (SLA) said, AFP reports from Lebanon.

Building worker Antoine Helu, 57, died in the explosion in the Christian region of Jezzine, an area outside Israel's self-declared "security zone" in south Lebanon but which is controlled by the SLA, the SLA radio reported. No group has claimed responsibility.

Slovak deputies vote to elect president: Slovak deputies voted yesterday to elect a new president, but the ballot is likely to result in a power vacuum which analysts say will benefit populist authoritarian premier Vladimir Meciar, AFP reports from Bratislava.

No candidate is expected to garner the required three-fifths majority in the vote, and most presidential powers are expected to pass to Meciar's government pending legislative elections in September, analysts say.

Cohen likely to visit Gulf in Feb: US Defence Secretary William Cohen is tentatively planning to travel to the Gulf early next month to consult with US allies on possible military action against Iraq, the Pentagon said Tuesday, AFP reports from Washington.

"The purpose of the trip would be to consult with our friends and allies in the Gulf about possible military action," Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said.

21 troops executed in DRC: Military authorities in the Democratic Republic of Congo on Tuesday carried out a public execution of 21 soldiers for murder, armed robbery and forming criminal associations, officials said, AFP reports from Kinshasa.

An official statement, read out on Voice of the People state radio, said President Laurent Kabila had refused to pardon them after the top military court condemned them to death. The men were the first to die in public execution in Kinshasa since Kabila seized power in the former Zaire in May ousting long-time dictator Mobutu Sese Seko.

4th week without power in Quebec: About 150,000 Quebecers in towns near Montreal began their fourth week without power as utility crews struggled to complete repairs of transmission lines damaged by a devastating ice storm, AP reports from Montreal.

Power has been slowly coming back in most areas of Quebec as 1,225 repair teams work 12 to 16-hour days in bitter cold.

3 French cops burnt to death: Three French policemen were burnt to death on Tuesday in a fire in an apartment they had entered to deal with a family dispute, a police spokesman said, AP reports from Paris.

A fourth man also died in the blaze and another policeman suffered serious burns. Details were still not clear, but it appeared the unidentified man had spread petrol and barricaded the police in the flat when a fire broke out.

14 killed in Colombia violence: At least 14 people were killed in the latest round of Colombia's endemic political violence, authorities said on Tuesday, Reuter reports from Bogota.

Police said the worst incident occurred in northern Santander province where about 150 Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas staged an attack on the small town of Bolivar late on Monday. Two policemen and five rebels died in the attack. A handful of policemen fended off the guerrillas by holding up in a fortress-like barracks until army reinforcements arrived.

Ex-editor to die for spying in Iran: The former editor-in-chief of an English-language daily newspaper in Iran has been sentenced to death, the Iranian news agency IRNA said on Tuesday, Reuter reports from London.

Morteza Firoozi, the Editor of Iran News, had been in custody on spying charges since last May, said the IRNA report, monitored in London by the British Broadcasting Corporation. The sentence was passed some time ago but had yet to be approved, the agency quoted senior judiciary official Ojatoleslam Gadiani as saying. There were no further details.

Clashes leave 22 dead in Kenya: Kenya's police Tuesday announced that the death toll in tribal clashes in the Njoro area of the Rift valley had risen to 22 since Sunday, AFP says from Nairobi.

That toll included an arsonist police shot and killed Tuesday in the town of Nakuru after he fired arrows at them on being challenged, a statement said. The death toll in ethnic clashes in the Rift valley's Laikipia district which broke out on January 14 meanwhile rose to 55 on Monday, the Daily Nation reported Tuesday.

Ted Hughes wins Whitbread award: Poet laureate Ted Hughes on Tuesday scooped the 21,000-pound (\$3,000 dollars) Whitbread Book of the Year award, Britain's richest literary prize, with his collection "Tales of Ovid," AP says from London.

The reclusive Hughes, 67, who recently broke a 35-year silence about his troubled marriage to the American poet Sylvia Plath with a searing book of poems, was ill and did not attend the awards ceremony. The prize was collected on his behalf by TV presenter Melvyn Bragg. "Tales of Ovid" beat Jim Crace's novel "Quarantine," a biography of Victor Hugo by Graham Rob and "The Ventriloquist's Tale," debut novel of Pauline Melville.



National Front leader and Prime Minister IK Gujral with Muslim cap (right) receives Sonia Gandhi at a Ramadan party which is hosted by Gujral in New Delhi Tuesday. General elections will be held during the months of February and March. Sonia Gandhi has started the campaigning to boost the Congress Party image in the forthcoming elections.

—AP/UNB photo

'Iraq had enough biological weapons to blow away Tel Aviv'

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 28: Reports that Iraq had enough biological weapons to "blow away Tel Aviv" raised some eyebrows here Tuesday, with some Security Council members complaining the press was given information that diplomats were not, reports AP.

In a story Tuesday, The New York Times quoted chief UN weapons inspector Richard Butler as having confirmed that his team had evidence that Iraq had loaded biological weapons onto missile warheads that could be driven around to avoid being hit by bombs.

The Times said Butler didn't describe the evidence, but said Iraq had enough biological material to "blow away Tel Aviv," and that some of the missiles "were very crude, but they work."

Butler heads the UN commission responsible for making sure Iraq has complied with UN orders issued at the end of the 1991 Gulf War to eliminate long-range missiles and weapons of mass destruction.

That is the main condition for the council to lift crippling economic sanctions imposed in 1990 after President Saddam Hussein's forces invaded Kuwait.

On Tuesday, Security Council members Russia and France complained that the information attributed to Butler in the Times went beyond what even they had been privy to in private consultations with him.

Several delegations expressed preoccupation about press articles which were not, in their opinion, consistent

with information made available to the Security Council during its informal consultation by the Special Commission, France's UN ambassador, Alain Dejamet, told reporters.

Russia's UN ambassador, Sergey Lavrov, also said he was surprised. Lavrov has in the past complained about council business being conducted by "media diplomacy."

Dejamet didn't specify Tuesday's story and didn't say which new information the council members found surprising. But later in the day, Butler acknowledged the Times story had raised some questions.

In a lunch time speech to The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations, Butler implied there may have been some confusion about what was new and what was old information.

Albright may visit Europe to discuss Iraq crisis

WASHINGTON, Jan 28: Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is expected to travel to Europe Thursday to discuss the situation in Iraq before heading to the Middle East and the Gulf, State Department officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

Albright's first stop in the week-long tour will be in Paris for meetings with French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine on Iraq's refusal to open sites to UN weapons inspectors, according to officials.

"In talking to the New York Times, what I was doing was reasonably extrapolating from the information we have," he said, referring to reports his predecessor, Rolf Ekeus, had made.

"I was not saying that I can take you today to a place in Iraq and say 'There's a missile that will do that thing,' partly because if it exists, they won't let us go and see it. That's the point."

UN inspectors have "sufficient evidence with respect to the BW capabilities (biological weapons capabilities) to justify the concern that's in the New York Times today, but we can't verify that," he told the gathering of Jewish leaders.

AFP from Baghdad adds: Iraq hit back late Tuesday at a warning by the head of the UN arms inspector Richard Butler, that Baghdad had enough germ weapons to wipe out Tel Aviv.

A government spokesman quoted by the Iraqi news agency (INA) accused Butler of raising tension between Baghdad and the United Nations and of seeking to involve Israel in attacks on Iraq.

INA quoted a spokesman for Iraq's information and culture ministry as saying that "the tension between Iraq and the UN derives from the propaganda of American policy in co-ordination with the Zionist and American intelligence services."

The spokesman added: "Butler is taking a further step in encouraging the Zionist entity (Israel) to participate directly in aggression."

Welfare Party asks Council of Europe to act against court verdict

ANKARA, Jan 28: Turkey's banned, pro-Islamic Welfare Party Tuesday asked the Council of Europe to act against a Turkish constitutional court verdict for the party's closure, the Anatolia News Agency said, reports AP.

Welfare's deputy leaders Abdullah Gul met Daniel Tarchy, the Council of Europe's secretary general, and Leni Fischer, chairman of the organisation's parliamentary assembly, the Strasbourg, it said.

Gul said his party's closure was against the principle of freedom of expression, according to the agency.

Turkey's constitutional court on January 16 ruled to dissolve the Welfare Party, or Refah in Turkish, the largest party in parliament, for activities judged harmful to the secular nature of the state.

Party leader and ex-premier Necmettin Erbakan and two of his close aides were also barred from politics for five years.

US condemns killing of 23 Hindus in Kashmir

WASHINGTON, Jan 28: The United States on Tuesday strongly condemned the killing of 23 Hindus by masked gunmen in India's state of Jammu and Kashmir urging militant groups there to "cease all acts of terrorism," reports Reuter.

"The United States strongly condemns this attack and calls upon militant organisations in Jammu and Kashmir to cease all acts of terrorism, State Department spokesman James Rubin said in a statement issued late on Tuesday."

Rubin extended condolences to families and people affected by such attacks. The Hindus were killed on Sunday night at Ganderbal's village 17 miles (27 km) from Srinagar, the summer capital of the state.

China urges restraint in Iraqi standoff

BEIJING, Jan 28: China urged restraint Tuesday in Iraq's standoff with the United Nations as the United States and Britain studied options for military force against Baghdad, reports AP.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao appealed for "consultations and other peaceful methods to resolve disputes and avoid intensifying the conflict."

China was opposed to the use of force or the threat of force, he said in a statement carried by the official Xinhua News Agency.

A permanent member of the Security Council, China has in recent weeks shaken off the low profile it has assumed throughout much of Iraq's periodic sparring with the United Nations over sanctions imposed for invading Kuwait in 1990.

Cambodia blasts UN report on political killings

PHNOM PENH, Jan 28: The Cambodian government Wednesday blasted a United Nations report on extrajudicial killings during a July coup d'état for containing information it said was erroneous and misleading, reports AP.

Forty-one followers of Norodom Ranariddh, the former co-prime minister, were allegedly murdered by soldiers loyal to his rival co-prime minister, Hun Sen, in the days following Hun Sen's violent seizure of power on July 5-6, according to a report by the United Nations Centre for Human Rights.

Repeating allegations made late last week, Hun Sen, along with Ung Huot, his new co-prime minister, claimed in a Jan. 27 letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan that four people listed in the report as dead "are, in fact, alive and well at this very moment."

The claims were immediately refuted by the UNCHR, which compiled the report, as an attempt to discredit the work of the center and to deflect focus away from lax government investigations into the killings that followed the coup.

Hun Sen has repeatedly

promised to bring to justice anyone perpetrating political violence.

Yet, despite Hun Sen's assurances to Annan of "real progress made in the investigation of extrajudicial killings," no one has been arrested for any of the murders committed during the coup, or for a grenade attack on a March rally organised by one of Hun Sen's opponents that killed 16 and wounded more than a hundred.

Only one of the names cited by Hun Sen and Ung Huot in the letter as alive was listed in the UNCHR report as dead. Two others were only listed as missing, and the fourth was never identified in the report.

The UNCHR maintained Wednesday that the man in question was blindfolded and handcuffed before being killed by a bullet to the head, but acknowledged that the victim's surname was misspelled in the report.

Hun Sen ousted Ranariddh in a coup last July that shattered a tense dual premiership installed after UN-organized elections in 1993.

Ranariddh and scores of his followers went into exile following the power grab.

Off the Record

Desperate prisoners

PHILADELPHIA: Cigarettes used to buy everything behind bars, from toilet paper and toothbrushes to drugs and sex, reports AP.

So what happens when the prison currency becomes contraband? Fast trading — and desperation.

"We had a Christmas tree in the hallway that they had to take down because someone tried to smoke it," said Dennis Carter, an inmate in Philadelphia, where prisons banned smoking Jan 1. "You got people going crazy because they can't smoke."

Fellow inmates have smoked grass, dirt, orange rinds or apple peels wrapped in toilet paper. At 2.20 dollars per box, tea bags also are popular smoking substitutes.

Those who have cigarettes can trade them for Little Debbie snack cakes that go for 1.19 dollars at prison commissaries, or for Twizzlers licorice (59 cents) and blueberry muffin rolls (dls 1.79).

"I refuse to pay five boxes of cakes for a cigarette," said Carter, a 38-year-old rape and robbery convict who smoked Newport for 15 years.

While inmates call smoking bans cruel and unusual, wardens say prisoners are getting healthier and jails are becoming cleaner. Smuggling? It's still going on, but prisoners are bringing in forbidden smokes instead of marijuana and cocaine.

America's prison population had best get used to this.

Teeth are not a dangerous weapon

LINCOLN, Nebraska: The Nebraska Court of Appeals ruled that the teeth used to take a chunk out of a man's nose did not constitute a dangerous weapon, reports AP.

The court on Tuesday reversed Todd Bachelor's second-degree assault conviction and 10- to 14-year sentence for the bite, but affirmed his three-month sentence for third-degree assault.

It was the first case of its kind heard by the appeals court, said Michael Hansen, Bachelor's attorney.

"No case with these type of facts, where the sole weight of the injury was inflicted by a body part" has been heard by either the appeals court or the Nebraska Supreme Court, Hansen said.

The appeals court ruled that if body parts were included in the state's definition of a dangerous weapon for second-degree assault, then teeth and legs would be equal to guns and knives.

On Nov 18, 1992, Bachelor made good on a threat to take a bite out of a truck driver's nose in a lounge at a hotel.

The driver, Paul Ellis, came to the aid of a friend involved in a fight with Bachelor.

Ban on LTTE makes prospect of negotiated peace bleak in Sri Lanka

NEW DELHI, Jan 28: Prospects of a negotiated political settlement of Sri Lanka's 15-year-old ethnic conflict have become remote after Colombo's decision to outlaw the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), experts here say, reports IANS.

The decision, prompted more by compulsion than by willingness, came in the aftermath of a brazen bomb attack on Sri Lanka's holiest Buddhist site at Kandy. The bombing on January 25, suspected to be carried out by the LTTE, seriously damaged parts of a complex that houses what is purported to be the Buddha's tooth.

"It is a fallout of a deeply emotional factor. The bomb attack was a hit at the very heart of Sri Lanka's Buddhist identity," said J N Dixit, former Indian High Commissioner to

Colombo who has closely monitored the situation in the island.

"With the banning of the LTTE, the prospects of a negotiated settlement are remoter. It would be very difficult now to revive a political dialogue with the LTTE and involve even moderate Tamils," Dixit told India Abroad News Service.

However Dixit asserted that the ban "is not an act of free will and the government was forced into a corner."

that it would not follow suit.

The Sri Lankan ethnic conflict has claimed some 50,000 lives in over a decade. At the heart of the problem lies the feeling among the Tamil minority that they have been discriminated against by the majority Sinhala people. The LTTE, under its elusive chief Velupillai Prabhakaran, has emerged as one of the most well-equipped terrorist groups in the world which was till recently running a virtual state of its own in Sri Lanka's north-east with its headquarters at Jaffna. But after sustained military operations the rebels have been pushed into nearby jungles.

Official sources in the Sri Lankan government have traditionally maintained that banning the LTTE would essentially mean closing the door on a negotiated settlement. "It is an

acute dilemma for us. There has been continuous grave provocation from the LTTE to ban it. We have so far stayed away from it because we want to act responsibly in the interest of the country's integrity," a senior functionary of the government had told IANS some time ago.

A top retired Indian military officer, who was involved in the Indian Peace Keeping Force operations against the LTTE between 1987 and 1990, said on the condition of anonymity: "Colombo's flip-flop on banning the LTTE was understandable but not acceptable. After all the government has to draw the line somewhere. They waited too long."

The ban could have several consequences, according to experts. One Sri Lankan expert said that it could make the LTTE even more vicious in its

attacks. "Not that what they have done so far is not vicious enough, but a ban could make it even more intransigent. As long as it is not outlawed there is at least a theoretical chance that negotiations can take place," he said.

For India the ban could have a significant consequence too. LTTE chief Prabhakaran is wanted by the Indian police in connection with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991. Although there is a remote chance of arresting Prabhakaran and making him stand trial in India, the ban opens up at least a possibility.

Experts say it would be important that Sri Lanka maintains the pressure on the LTTE and one way could be to follow-up rigorously on the ban. Although it is not yet clear

whether the ban precludes negotiations with the Tamil rebels, it seems highly unlikely they could be started any time soon. This is especially because the attack on the Kandy temple is expected to make Sri Lanka's politically powerful Buddhist clergy even less willing to talk with the LTTE. Hardliners among the clergy have always opposed negotiations with the LTTE. The attack could also intensify the ordinary Sinhala opinion against any talks.

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who came to power in 1994 riding high on the promise of ethnic reconciliation, too would be forced to rethink her strategy, according to Indian experts. "She can no longer hold out the white lotus (a symbol for peace) to the LTTE," one expert said.