

Russia must preserve its N-capability: Sergeyev

MOSCOW, Dec 29: Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev said that Russia will continue to reform its military but must preserve its nuclear striking capability, which remains the bulwark of national security, the Segodnya newspaper reported today, says AFP.

"In order to discourage anyone from developing a desire to solve their problems with Russia with the help of weapons, we must carry out our reforms cleverly and not lose our nuclear potential," Sergeyev said.

"Russia has been spending too much to build the army and too little on developing hardware and weaponry," the minister added.

Sergeyev praised Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov for his interest in increasing the defence budget and stated that spending next year may reach as much as 3.58 per cent of gross domestic product.

The defence minister also dismissed rumours about a

conflict between his ministry and the general staff.

"We have no contradictions concerning the aims of military reform. The point is that quite naturally, my colleagues have their own standpoints concerning the way to reform. We will look for a compromise but not at the expense of principal decisions," Sergeyev said.

President Boris Yeltsin said Monday that Russia has slashed its armed forces to 1.2 million men as per a military reform package drafted last year, but conceded that poor financing has hampered further defence reform efforts.

Yeltsin also congratulated Sergeyev on Monday for putting new intercontinental ballistic missiles, called Topol-M on combat duty last weekend.

The rockets are the first produced in Russia to replace the Soviet-era multiple-warhead SS-18s banned under the 1993 START II treaty, which has yet to be approved by the Russian parliament.

16 western tourists abducted in S Yemen

SAN'A, Dec 29: Islamic militants kidnapped 16 Western tourists in southern Yemen Monday, including 12 Britons, two Americans and two Australians, security officials said, reports AP.

They said the kidnappers, who belong to the Islamic Jihad extremist group, were demanding the release of their leader Saleh Haidara al-Atwi, who was arrested by Yemeni authorities two weeks ago.

Tribal leaders said about 10 gunmen ambushed a convoy of five vehicles carrying a group of 17 tourists near the southern town of Mawdiyah, in the Abyan province. They opened fire on a number of policemen escorting the tourists.

No one was injured in the first fight, but the group's British tour leader and a Yemeni guide managed to escape, said the tribal leaders, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The remaining 16 tourists were abducted and driven to an unknown destination in Abyan province, about 200 kilometres south of the capital, San'a.

The British tourists included six women and six men. The remaining tourists were two American women and two Australian men.

Security officials in Abyan, also speaking on condition of anonymity, said al-Atwi's arrest was part of a crackdown on Islamic militants who were enforcing strict Islamic rules on the population of southern Yemen.

They said members of the group flogged men for selling and drinking alcohol — which is forbidden in Islam — and women for ignoring the Islamic dress code.

The group, which has no more than 200 members, also ran a military camp in southern Yemen, said the officials. The kidnappers are also demanding the release of another leader. The security sources did not identify him.

Britain's Press Association said the tourists were travelling with the British tour company explore in conjunction with a local operator in San'a.

"The British tourists are all young but I cannot say any more," PA quoted the operator, Yahya al-Haifi, as saying.

BRIEFLY

S'pore jails politician for bomb hoax
A former opposition politician with a criminal history has been jailed for 18 months for a bomb hoax nearly 13 years ago, a newspaper reported Tuesday, AP reports from Singapore.

Wee Lai Seng, a 46-year-old former United Front candidate who lost his bid for Parliament in 1979 and 1980, made two calls on Feb. 21, 1986 claiming he would detonate two bombs planted in the Criminal Investigation Department headquarters by remote control, said The Straits Times. Police searched the CID premises but found no bombs. On the run since then, he was arrested earlier this month upon arriving by plane from Thailand.

China says no to balloon flights
China is withholding permission for balloons to cross its airspace, after British tycoon Richard Branson and his teammates drifted off course during their failed round-the-world attempt, the Foreign Ministry said yesterday, AP reports from Beijing.

China had earlier approved overflights by three round-the-world balloon teams, but is now suspending permission, Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said.



Demonstrators, some in masks, hold anti-Britain and anti-Spain signs during a protest in front of the government palace, in Santiago, Chile, Monday demanding the release of former Chilean dictator Gen Augusto Pinochet, who remains under police detention in London, fighting extradition to Spain where he faces charges for genocide and torture. — AP/UNB photo

Imelda asks court to dismiss cases

MANILA, Dec 29: The widow of dictator Ferdinand Marcos Tuesday asked a special anti-graft court to dismiss cases filed by the Philippine government to recover \$70 million in Swiss bank deposits the Marcoses allegedly stole from public coffers, reports AP.

A lawyer of former first lady Imelda Marcos said the cases were filed by Philippine government lawyers in December 1991, more than a year after the required period for doing so has expired.

Lawyer Rodolfo Jimenez said the Philippine government also violated a law forbidding the filling of such forfeiture cases one year before any general elections. Presidential, congressional and local polls were held in the country in May 1992.

Under Philippine laws, forfeiture cases can only be filed within four years after a government official being charged has been removed from office, Jimenez told a news conference.

Marcos was toppled from power by an army-backed popular revolt in February 1986 and died in exile in Hawaii three years later.

Sharif govt does U-turn on Shariah Bill

ISLAMABAD: After having announced making Shariah the supreme law of the country under the 15th Constitutional Amendment four months ago, the government of Nawaz Sharif has begun to soft-peddle the issue in the face of stiff resistance from various groups of Pakistani society.

The Sharif government, which has two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, the lower house of Pakistani Parliament, now says that the purpose of the Bill is only to provide quick and speedy justice to the people.

According to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the present system of justice does not fulfil this duty and, therefore, a vast majority of public is badly affected by it. The Shariah Bill, he says, will produce the impetus for swift justice and will help bring criminals to book.

The federal law minister, Khalid Anwar, has also echoed the same theme. He had said that the existing system of justice has collapsed and, overloaded to a breaking point, it seems unable to meet the growing demands for effective enforcement of law.

This, however, is a complete U-turn on the Shariah motorway.

When the Shariah Bill, or the 15th Constitutional Amendment, whose text was read on August 28 by Sharif in a half-hour long speech on the floor of the National Assembly, he was announced its scope was not limited to administering justice alone.

That month Sharif made a bellowing speech in Islamabad in front of a stage-managed congregation of religious leaders and agged on the participants to break the legs of those who opposed the Bill. This he justified by saying that the opponents of the Bill were against the enforcement of true Islam in the country.

But the government has been changing its stance over the Bill. At first, it was announced that it was all along an attempt to grab total power, upturning the ex-

International US-UK airstrikes

Iraq lashes out at Arab leaders

BAGHDAD, Dec 29: Iraq's official media lashed out Tuesday at Arab leaders for not supporting Saddam Hussein's regime, and his deputy prime minister criticized the Egyptian president for saying that Iraq provoked the recent US-British airstrikes, reports AP.

Arab leaders must either support Iraq or risk the "wrath" of the Arab masses, Iraqi newspapers said in reference to the Arab League's failure to convene a proposed meeting to Arab foreign ministers to discuss and condemn the Dec 16-19 airstrikes, which prompted widespread public protests in Arab capitals.

In another sign of dwindling official support for Iraq, hopes were fading for an Arab summit in which Baghdad believes Arab leaders will agree to defy UN trade sanctions imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Under UN resolutions, the

sanctions cannot be lifted until UN weapons inspectors certify that Iraq is free of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons along with long-range missiles.

The inspectors, complaining that Iraq was obstructing their work, withdrew from the country Dec. 16, triggering the US-British assault.

The governments of Iraq's Arab neighbours have voiced little opposition to the airstrikes although the mood on the streets has been vehemently pro-Iraq.

In a front-page editorial, Iraq's al-Qadissi newspaper warned Arab leaders that ignoring "the snowballing Arab wrath ... will shake the ground from under their feet."

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in one of his most forthright comments on the crisis, said in an interview published Monday that Saddam

was responsible for his country's woes.

"The ruling regime (in Iraq) is the reason for all the problems ... and Egypt naturally does not support this regime," Mubarak was quoted as saying in the al-Jumhuriya, an Egyptian government-owned newspaper.

Mubarak, a close US ally, also said that it was he who persuaded US President Bill Clinton to halt the bombardment, which was intended to diminish Iraq's ability to build weapons of mass destruction.

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz responded with harsh words in a front-page editorial he wrote for Tuesday's al-Jumhuriya, an Iraqi government-owned newspaper.

"President Mubarak assumes a role for himself which both Washington and London have not given to him," Aziz wrote. "In reality there is no



Palestinian women among the remains of their homes in Kufri Haris, which were demolished by the Israeli army Monday. The demolition of two houses in the West Bank village brought dozens of villagers into confrontation with the Israeli army which responded with tear gas and rubber-coated bullets. — AP/UNB photo

Thousands go on rampage in Indonesian town

JAKARTA, Dec 29: Thousands went on a rampage in an Indonesian town, attacking police stations, setting buildings ablaze and clashing with security forces after the death of a detainee in police custody, police and witnesses said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Witnesses said around 2,000 people attacked and torched two police stations on Monday in the town of Liwa, on the island of Sumatra, after reports that a man accused of theft had died in police custody. Three houses were also set ablaze.

Police said they had fired warning shots to disperse the angry mob who were trying to set another police post on fire. They said at least seven people were injured during the clashes.

"The situation was taken under control by mid-afternoon and crowds started to disperse following the warning shots," county police chief Lieutenant Colonel Trei Panaryo told Reuters by telephone.

He said the detained man had committed suicide. But angry locals said the man had been deliberately poisoned.

Panaryo said the situation in Liwa was back to normal on Tuesday with businesses and shops open as usual. Police were patrolling the town, he said.

Violence was also reported on Monday in North Sumatra and the island of Sulawesi.

Police opened fire on hundreds of farmers who had occupied a state plantation near the north Sumatran capital of Medan.

The Jakarta Post newspaper said five people were injured by rubber bullets during the clash. The farmers claimed the land had been taken from them without compensation and refused to vacate it.

In the town of Poso on the eastern island of Sulawesi, police clashed with a crowd of thousands who had ransacked and torched dozens of buildings during a brawl between rival villages.

The Jakarta Post said 22 people were injured during the clashes but most were released the same day from Poso general hospital.

Thousands of people ran amok in the town last week after allegations a drunk Christian had stabbed a Muslim on Christmas eve.

Two Khmer Rouge defectors get warm welcome from Hun Sen

PHNOM PENH, Dec 29: Two top Khmer Rouge leaders long wanted for genocide were greeted with handshakes and smiles by Prime Minister Hun Sen at a military base Tuesday after he defied growing pressure and pledged not to put them on trial, reports AP.

Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, key members of the inner circle of late Khmer Rouge chief Pol Pot, were flown by helicopter from a former rebel stronghold to Hun Sen's heavily guarded residence on a base outside the capital.

Khieu Samphan, 67, needed help walking up stairs. His normally white hair was dyed black in an apparent attempt at disguise during his months on the run as Khmer Rouge territory fell under government control.

Laughing and joking, Hun Sen told Khieu Samphan not to worry about a throng of journalists, most of whom were kept at bay.

"I told journalists all about this yesterday at a Cabinet meeting, so I don't need to make a lot of comment," Hun Sen said.

They posed for pictures with Leng Sary, a Khmer Rouge leader who was pardoned in 1996 for his role in genocide in exchange for making peace with the government and leading thousands of guerrillas out of a stalemated civil war.

In exchange for officially ending their part in the war — all but over for more than a year anyway — Hun Sen said he would not try Khieu Samphan or Nuon Chea for the deaths of as many as 2 million people.

"If we bring them to trial, it will not benefit the nation, it will only mean a return to civil war," Hun Sen said Monday. "We should dig a hole and bury the past and look toward the future."

Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea have been sheltered for several days in Pailin, an ex-rebel stronghold nominally under government control run by Leng Sary.

Under heavy guard, Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea and Leng Sary lifted off from the Pailin police station for the two-hour flight to Takhmau, a Phnom Penh suburb where Hun Sen lives on a base dubbed the "Tiger's Lair." They were accompanied by their families.

The reason it has not been able to muster enough votes is because it has failed to convince parties of the smaller provinces, which have equal number of seats in the Senate, that its motives are other than amassing total power.

Even though diluted, the 15th Constitutional Amendment still carries a clause which makes it supra-judicial and supra-constitutional. It says: "the provisions of this article will have effect notwithstanding anything contained in the Constitution, any law or any judgement of the court." So many question the government's real intentions.

"The government cannot implement the Shariah because it is part of the same corrupt system which it hopes to overthrow. We the true devotees of Islam, will enforce Islam and Shariah," Qazi Hussain Ahmad of the Jamaat-e-Islami says. These doubts now deepen as the Sharif Government puts another spin on the reasons for which it launched its Shariah drive and slowly tries to put the issue on the backburner.

Off the Record

Reunited after a lifetime

MONTREAL: A brother and sister from England who were separated 80 years ago after being orphaned during World War I have been reunited, reports AP.

Daisy Bance, 85, hugged her younger brother Albert, 84, in a reunion arranged by their children and grandchildren.

"I don't want to let you go any more," Daisy Bance said Monday as she held on to her brother, who was four when they were put into separate orphanages in England.

"Here I am," said Albert. "I'm your brother. I've been waiting a lifetime."

They were split up after their parents died during World War I. Albert Bance was shipped to Canada when he was 14 to work on an Eastern Townships farm. He was one of the so-called Home Children who were sent to Canada, supposedly for a better life.

Arriving in 1929, he worked on a farm, got married, then served as fire and police chief of a small town. His wife died three years ago, but he has five children, 12 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. One more is on the way. His children and grandchildren were responsible for bringing the two together.

They checked English birth records, searched the Internet, and sent letters to possible relatives in England.

They finally found Daisy Bance about six weeks ago.

Then one of Bance's daughters won a Montreal radio-station contest to bring family home for the holidays.

They gave the contest prize to their long-lost aunt.

Daisy Bance never married after growing up in nine homes for orphans in England. She spent her life working as live-in help for wealthy people, said friend April Monk, who accompanied Daisy on the trip.

The hunt is still on for another sister, though there have been rumours she died as a young adult.

New Year's in space

MOSCOW: Russia's cosmonauts intend to have a traditional New Year's celebration in space, including a tree, a weightless Santa Claus and gifts, a Russian news agency reported Monday, says AP.

The report from the ITAR-Tass news agency did not explain how the cosmonauts managed to get a tree into space, although a collapsible plastic one could easily have been slipped into a cargo ship. Nor did it say who would do the long robes and beard of Grandfather Frost, Russia's Santa Claus.

The cosmonauts' families were allowed to send New Year's gifts to Mir in October.

"We had to write on them, 'Do not open until Dec 31,'" said Maria Avdeyeva, the wife of cosmonaut Sergei Avdeyev, who will also be celebrating his 43rd birthday on Jan 1.

The cosmonauts have slashed some delicacies for the holiday, ITAR-Tass reported. Russian space agency rules prohibit cosmonauts from bringing liquor aboard Mir, but it is apparently a rule that was made to be broken, and vodka has found its way onto the space station in the past.

Combining love of gold and god

BEIJING: Chinese artists in the southern boomtown of Shenzhen have combined their love of all that glitters with pious devotion to craft the world's largest gold-plated Buddha icon, state media reported, reports Reuters.

The 3.8-metre statue of Kuan Yin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, required more than 100 kg of gold and took a team of artists more than two years to complete, the official Xinhua news agency said.

It was confirmed as the largest Buddhist statue of its kind by the Shanghai office of the Guinness Book of World Records on Sunday.

In addition to the gold, the glittering Buddha boasts 120 carats of diamonds, 100 kg of jadeite and thousands of precious stones.

It is on display in the southern island province of Hainan.

Anwar Ibrahim's trial Police used 'questionable' procedures to collect DNA samples

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 29: Police used "highly questionable" procedures in collecting DNA samples from sacked Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, a state doctor testified Tuesday in Anwar's sex and corruption trial, reports AP.

Dr Zahari Noor, a forensic expert at the state-run General Hospital, testified that he took blood samples from Anwar on Sept. 28th.

Anwar was at police headquarters, eight days after his arrest. He agreed to give blood samples that were to be tested for the HIV virus, hepatitis and venereal disease, Noor said.

Noor testified Tuesday that Anwar never gave permission for his blood to be tested for DNA. He said police demanded the blood more than two months later so they could test it for DNA.

Defence attorney Christopher Fernando asked whether the blood would still be viable for DNA testing.

"The results of the DNA testing done on this sample would be highly questionable," Noor said. "The blood being sent after about two and one-half months ... is an inordinate delay by any standard."

Noor said the blood cells containing the DNA would have perished because no anti-clotting chemicals had been added to Anwar's original blood samples.

When the prosecution went back to Noor, however, he conceded "it's possible to obtain DNA from a substantially degraded blood sample."

On Monday, Dr. Halim Haji Manzar, a pathologist at General Hospital, testified that the blood taken from Anwar was given directly to police and they never had a chance to test it for sexually transmitted diseases.

The prosecution was expected to put state DNA experts on the stand to testify that DNA samples taken from Anwar matched those of semen stains found on a mattress in an apartment where Anwar allegedly carried on sexual trysts.

The defence, anticipating this tactic, is trying to show that at no time did Anwar give permission for his blood to be tested for DNA. Defence attorneys Monday implied that hair and semen samples may have been taken from Anwar while he was unconscious after his beating in police custody.

Fernando on Tuesday popped a question to Noor that led to strenuous prosecution objection, which was overruled by trial judge Augustine Paul.

He asked Noor: "When you examined Sukma Darmawan, you found that he had no homosexual history when you conducted an anal test on him?"

Sukma, Anwar's adopted brother, was sentenced to six months in jail on Sept. 19 after confessing that he allowed Anwar to sodomize him in April. He says he was mentally and physically abused by police and coerced into making a guilty plea, which he is now appealing.

Noor testified that he examined Sukma on Sept 9 and determined there was no evidence of anal intercourse.



Salvage personnel attempt to extricate a Russian cargo aircraft, Aeroflot IL-76, Monday from the mud beyond the runway at Skavsta airport in Nyköping, Sweden. The aircraft overran the runway Sunday whilst landing. — AP/UNB photo