

## 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 feed 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.

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-Qadissiy 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.

The United States and its allies set up the no-fly zones to protect Kurdish and Shi'ite rebels in the north and south from Saddam's forces.

On Tuesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Baozao said his government was "deeply disturbed" by the exchange of fire. He also criticized the no-fly zones as violations of UN charter and international norms.

## 16 western tourists abducted in S Yemen

SANA, 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 fire, 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, Sana.

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 vigilantes 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 Sana.

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

The British tourists included

## 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 bids 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 US\$570 million in Swiss bank deposits the Marcos 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.

— AP/UNB photo

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