

Leaders gather to give ME peace process a boost

TEL AVIV, Jan 12: Archbishop Desmond Tutu predicted the "nightmare will end" for Arabs and Israelis. Henry Kissinger said a Palestinian state would emerge and Mikhail Gorbachev said force was not the answer, reports AP.

With speeches interspersed with songs from Arab and Israeli singers, more than 350 current and former diplomats, politicians, and members of parliament from around the world gathered to give a boost to the Mideast peace process in its hour of need.

The gala event in Tel Aviv's glittering new Centre for Performing Arts was organised by former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres and attracted more than 150 Arabs from Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian areas and Morocco.

The show of peacemaking spirit came as Israel was beginning a four-month election campaign and at a time when the peace process is once again mired in mutual accusations and inaction.

There were signs of impatience too as Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa of Egypt

asked the Israeli government "What is taking you so long?"

Moussa set the tone from the Arab side with a strongly worded attack on the current government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for what he called a "policy of procrastination" and delay in implementing the Wye peace accord reached last October 23.

"Why adopt policies that can only result in a loss of confidence? Why insist on undermining and discrediting partners? Why act as if peace is a threat to Israel?"

Ahmed Qureia, known as Abu Ala, the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, said it was important for Israel to recognise Palestinian desire for statehood before May 4 when the interim peace agreement expires.

"We must reach an immediate understanding for the establishment of the Palestinian state by the fourth of May 1999 and a recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination," Qureia said.

In recent weeks, visitor after visitor has urged Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to post-

pone a declaration of statehood to avoid creating tensions in advance of Israel's May 17 elections.

Kissinger, the former US secretary of state, said previous Israeli prime ministers had risen to the occasion and had done what was necessary for peace and predicted all would be well.

"I think the peace process is going to succeed," said Kissinger. "I think it is going through a temporary period of difficulty."

Kissinger said at the end of the process there will be a Palestinian state but said the Palestinians should not use the threat of declaring independence as a weapon.

Although he founded the step-by-step approach, Kissinger said that it was time to resolve the big remaining issues such as the future of Jerusalem, refugees and borders.

"I do not believe that any further partial steps are possible and that we are close enough to the end to bring this to a conclusion on terms that give Israel a sense of security and the

Arabs a sense of dignity," he said.

Israeli President Ezer Weizman, whose role as ceremonial head of state usually keeps him above the political fray, called on his own government to implement the Wye accords.

Netanyahu's hard-line Cabinet suspended further West Bank withdrawals, saying the Palestinians were violating the spirit of peacemaking by threatening to declare a state instead of negotiating a solution.

US Mideast envoy Dennis Ross read a message of greeting from President Clinton but avoided commenting on the status of negotiations.

Asked for reaction on the gathering, David Bar-Ilan, a top Netanyahu aide, said no one from the government was invited "but this wasn't that kind of gathering. It was mostly elder statesmen."

The only member of Netanyahu's Cabinet who was present was Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, who is being wooed by both Netanyahu's Likud and the opposition Labour Party as well as centrist factions.



From left: Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, former Costa Rican president Dr Oscar Sanchez Arias, Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres, former Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev and former South African president FW de Klerk link hands in the Grand Park Hotel in the West Bank town of Ramallah Monday. Peres and Arafat joined leaders from around the world at the hotel in a visit sponsored by the Peres Centre for Peace in the Middle East. More than 150 past and present world leaders, financiers, and Nobel laureates are in the region at the invitation of the centre to sponsor Arab-Israeli economic projects and demonstrate their support for Mideast peace. — AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Two Tibetan monks arrested: Two Tibetan monks were arrested for preparing a letter to UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson during her visit to China and Tibet last September, a Tibetan monitoring group said yesterday. AFP reports from Beijing.

The monks, from Drepung Monastery, six km northwest of Lhasa, were arrested in the days following Robinson's departure from the Tibetan capital on September 12. The London-based Tibet Information Network (TIN) said.

HK departs 185 Vietnamese: Hong Kong yesterday deported 185 Vietnamese illegal immigrants, a government spokesman said. AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Most of the 156 men, 27 women and two children flown to Hanoi had slipped into Hong Kong last year, but a few had been in Hong Kong since 1988. Many of the Vietnamese had returned to Hong Kong after being deported earlier.

Cohen begins Japan visit: Before meeting with Japanese leaders to discuss regional security issues, US Defence Secretary William Cohen opened his visit to Japan Tuesday with a review of American troops stationed. AP reports from Yokota Air Base, Japan.

Cohen's four-day visit was expected to focus on plans to strengthen bilateral military cooperation and increasing concerns over North Korea's development and testing of long-range missiles.

Author Naomi Mitchison dies: Lady Naomi Mitchison, who was often called the "doyen" of Scottish literature, has died at the age of 101, her family said Monday. AP reports from Carradale, Scotland.

The cause and location of her death were not immediately available. A poet and novelist, Lady Mitchison was a prolific writer — completing more than 80 novels in her lifetime. She never confined herself to one style, writing historical novels, science fiction, travel writing and a three volume autobiography. Her first novel, "The Conqueror," was published in 1923 and was based on her wartime experiences.

6 die as ROK freighter capsizes: Six crewmen died Tuesday after a South Korean freighter capsized in rough seas off southwestern Japan, the Maritime Safety Agency said. Seven other crewmen were rescued. AP reports from Tokyo.

Japanese patrol boat recovered the bodies of six crew members, each wearing life vests, said Shingo Sezaki, a spokesman for the agency's Fukuoka office. The bodies were to be handed over later to a South Korean Marine police boat heading to the scene, Sezaki said. The agency, Japan's coast guard, had said earlier that all but one of the 13 crewmen had been confirmed safe.

Blast in Chinese factory kills 8: Explosions at a fireworks factory in southern China and a market in eastern China have killed at least eight people and severely injured seven others, according to a report seen Tuesday in Beijing. AP says from Beijing.

Eight people died and three suffered serious burns when a truck carrying caps for toy guns exploded on January 6 after backing into a wall at a wholesale market in Linyi county, in eastern China's Shandong province, the official newspaper Yangcheng Evening News reported.

China detains labour leader: Police have detained a retired driver for a state transport company in western China who tried to organise workers demanding unpaid pensions, a rights group reported yesterday. AP says from Beijing.

Police took Yue Tianxiang from his home in Tianshi city in Gansu province on Monday, and his whereabouts were unknown, the Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said in a statement. Yue announced January 4 he was organising a group called Chinese Workers Monitor to press for the rights of fellow workers at the transport company and elsewhere, the Hong Kong-based group said.

Blast claims 16 in Vietnamese mine: A coal mine explosion killed 16 workers and injured eight others, three seriously, in the northern province of Quang Ninh, a company executive said yesterday. AP reports from Hanoi.

The accident occurred Monday morning at the Mao Khe coal mine, 60 km east of Ha Long Bay, the executive said. The victims' bodies, burned but still identifiable, were recovered the same day, he said. The three badly injured workers were being treated at the provincial general hospital for burns, while the other casualties were treated at the company's clinic.



Pop singer Celine Dion holds her favourite Pop/Rock female artiste, favourite adult contemporary artiste and favourite soundtrack, "Titanic" awards during the 26th annual American Music Awards held at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles on Monday. — AP/UNB photo

Toddler hailed as reincarnation of Premadasa

COLOMBO, Jan 12: 22-month-old boy is being hailed in Sri Lanka as the reincarnation of assassinated President Ranasinghe Premadasa, press reports said AFP.

Hundreds of people have flocked to the central village of Hanguaranketha to see the toddler who bears a striking resemblance to Premadasa, who was killed by a suicide bomber in May 1993, the Sinhalese language Divaina Daily said.

The boy, born to a peasant family, has even begun saying his name is "Premadasa" although it is Vijebahu, and he speaks of Premadasa's family as his own, reports said.

He has also spoken of being hit by "Baba" in his previous life, Premadasa's assassin is believed to be a Tamil suicide bomber known as Babu who had infiltrated his household.

Vijebahu wakes up at 3:00 am and follows a Buddhist ritual similar to what the late president used to do daily, the Divaina said.

He has pointed to the image of Premadasa on a one rupee coin and claimed it was him, reported the mass circulation Lankadeepa Daily.

Relatives of Premadasa have shown interest in the story and confirmed that Vijebahu looked like the late president.

There was no immediate scientific explanation for the 22-month-old's utterances but the majority Buddhists in Sri Lanka believe in reincarnation.

Will Smith leads off American Music Awards

LOS ANGELES, Jan 12: Will Smith led off the 26th annual American Music Awards Monday night with a trophy for "Big Willie Style" as favourite soul/rhythm and blues album, reports AP.

"That's the way to start the evening," said the actor-singer. "I'd been away for a while. I'm just glad people are accepting me again making the music."

Smith, Shania Twain and Celine Dion were favoured to collect the most American Music Awards in a ceremony that could forecast some of the big winners at next month's Grammy Awards.

Canadian songbirds Twain and Dion were up against each other in three categories among the 20 awards set for presentation at the Shrine Auditorium during a three-hour show televised on ABC.

Lauryn Hill, who last week received a leading 10 nomination for the February 24 Grammys, was up for just one American Music Award — in the soul artist category of the soul/rhythm and blues division.

World's most powerful oven built in Nepal

KATHMANDU, Jan 12: The world's most powerful solar oven has been built in Nepal by an international team of solar energy experts, as part of a drive to promote renewable energy here, reports said today, says AFP.

A Swiss expert on solar energy says here that the most powerful solar oven in the world has been built in Itahari, 275 km southeast of Kathmandu, the state-run news agency RSS said.

The nine square metre (97 sq feet) oven was constructed by a team of German, Swiss and Greek experts with the help of the international solar energy development institution and Germany's world one group, it said.

"The rays of the sun can be directly collected and focused from the oven to store the energy from which food for 300 students of a school can be prepared," it said.

The solar oven, built at the local modern preparatory high school in Itahari district was inaugurated by former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Bishwa Nath Upadhyaya who said the technology was ideal for Nepal.

"It could be utilised at various places of the kingdom, it could help prevent rapid deforestation in Nepal," he said.

Energy expert Japan Nath

Shrestha told AFP that Nepal's annual energy consumption was \$2 million megawatt hours, most of which was produced with fuelwood.

He said that although the potential for hydro-electric power in Nepal was massive, only one per cent of the power available had so far been tapped.

In view of the 67.7 per cent fuelwood energy consumption in Nepal, the government has now started emphasising tapping of solar energy and bio-gas plants by providing as much as 50 per cent subsidy to those interested," Shrestha said.

To save the country's dwindling forestry reserves, Nepal was eager to develop renewable energy technology for the development of rural sector, he said.

"Solar energy and bio-gas energy could serve as country's important energy resources and as alternative to fuelwood. If these alternative forms of energy sources could be properly utilised, it would tremendously help alleviate poverty apart from saving the country's invaluable and depleting forestry, he said.

Shrestha emphasised the need to develop renewable energy technology for rural development as 90 per cent of Nepal's 22.6 million population live in more than 4,000 villages scattered across the kingdom.

'India's N-test a sign of burgeoning pragmatism'

NEW DELHI, Jan 12: India's nuclear tests were a sign of burgeoning pragmatism in its attitude toward defense and international affairs, the country's foreign minister argues in a new book, reports AP.

India advocated global nuclear disarmament in its role as the voice of the world's poor and nonaligned, and still sees that as a long-term goal. Jaswant Singh writes in "Defending India," released this week. But today, Singh said, India must speak for itself, and act to build a nuclear deterrent against the threat it sees in neighbours China and Pakistan.

The release of "Defending India" comes just a few weeks before Singh resumes talks with US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott on India's nuclear policy. The United States has been trying to persuade India to curb its nuclear ambitions, but Singh's book is one in a series of comments by officials that make it clear New Delhi will give up only so much.

During its first five decades of independence, Singh writes, India's anti-nuclear stance was part of a naive and romanticized view of the world that left it with "no established land boundaries; an absence of a secure political environment; a devaluation of India's voice in global affairs and, worryingly, not even a beginning of any institutional framework for conceptualizing and managing the country's defense."

1998 was the hottest year

WASHINGTON, Jan 12: Last year was the hottest year on record, according to NASA researchers who say the rising temperatures are further evidence that the world is heating up, reports AP.

"Global surface temperatures in 1998 set a new record by a wide margin," NASA said.

In announcing its findings on the Internet, NASA said Monday the average global temperature last year was 0.34 of a degree Fahrenheit warmer than the previous record, in 1995.

Baghdad's challenge to no-fly zones drawing missile fires UN seeks report on Iraq's current humanitarian situation

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 12: The UN Security Council decided on Monday to seek an update on the humanitarian situation in Iraq following US and British air strikes, but postponed discussion of Iraqi disarmament, the council president said, reports AFP.

Council president Celso Amorim informed reporters after closed door consultations that "There is still work to do to see if we find a common position on the next steps to be taken on the disarmament file."

He also acknowledged "Other broad difficulties in relation to the political situation" between Iraq and the 15-member Security Council.

Amorim, the Brazilian ambassador, said the council would receive an update from UN officials today on the humanitarian situation in sanctions-hit Iraq where the United Nations administers an oil for food scheme.

Western diplomats said that Russia is pressing to keep the issue on the council agenda, the deal enables Iraq to export limited quantities of oil in return for badly needed food and medicine.

Amorim on Friday spoke with the other 14 council members

with his team. "I think that the possibility is real that there will be a further development of UNSCOM," said Richard Butler, the executive director of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) for Iraq.

It will be a bit different from the past... UNSCOM modernised if you will, Butler said at a conference here on non-proliferation.

Big powers at the UN Security Council are discussing changes to UNSCOM in the wake of last month's British and US air strikes, that prompted Iraq to cut off all co-operation with the UN disarmament inspectors.

Another report says, Iraq continued to challenge US jets patrolling its "no-fly" zones Monday drawing new missile fire from American aircraft.

Two US F-15s on routine missions over the northern "no-fly" zone fired precision-guided bombs on a ground based missile launch site near Mosul, Iraq.

An F16C/J fired a high-speed HARM missile on a second site at virtually the same time Lieutenant Colonel Steve Campbell said.

Likud leadership Ex-mentor will challenge Netanyahu

TEL AVIV, Jan 12: A former Israeli defence minister announced Monday that he will challenge Benjamin Netanyahu for the leadership of their Likud Party ahead of national elections scheduled for May, reports AP.

Moshe Arens had been a mentor to Netanyahu. As Israeli ambassador to the United States in 1982, Arens brought Netanyahu into political life by appointing him deputy ambassador.

Arens was instrumental in helping Netanyahu win the premiership in 1996 but the two men parted ways shortly afterwards.

Arens, like several other Likud veterans, became critical of his prodigy, publicly complaining that Netanyahu was doing a poor job handling the peace process with the Palestinians and expressed a lack of trust in the young leader.

At a new conference Monday announcing his bid for the party leadership in upcoming primaries, Arens was cautious to avoid direct criticism of Netanyahu.

Hindu zealots attack church hrs after Vajpayee's visit

NEW DELHI, Dec 12: Hindu zealots attacked a church in western India just hours after the prime minister visited the area to try to halt a spate of violence against the Christian community, a priest said today.

The church in the Dang district of Gujarat state was torched in the early hours of Monday morning. Father Dominique Emmanuel of the Catholic Conference of Bishops of India told AFP.

Local members of the Christian community managed to douse the flames before the building could be destroyed. The police have registered the case as one of attempted arson.

Half a dozen churches and missionary schools in Gujarat were burned down by Hindu zealots around the Christmas period, prompting a personal visit to the region by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

However, Father Dominique argued the fresh attack, just hours after Vajpayee's departure showed the visit had been "counter-productive."

The zealots have been emboldened by Vajpayee's visit," he said, pointing out the premier had toured Dang with the president of a Hindu militant

Lankan navy kills 20 LTTE rebels

COLOMBO, Jan 12: Sri Lankan naval crafts damaged four Tamil Tiger rebel boats, killing at least 20 guerrillas during fighting on the island nation's east coast, a navy spokesman said Tuesday, reports AP.

Captain Patrick Jayasinghe said a navy patrol detected the guerrilla boats late Monday and engaged them off Pulmoddai town near the port city of Trincomalee.

During the confrontation that lasted nearly six hours, one terrorist boat caught fire and another sank, Jayasinghe said. Two other rebel boats also were damaged, he said.

He said rebel radio transmissions intercepted by the navy said at least 20 rebels were killed in the battle.

UNSC warns of telecommunications sanctions against Angola

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 12: The Security Council is warning Angola's rebels it may impose telecommunications sanctions on them following the downing of two UN-chartered planes over UNITA-controlled territory, reports AP.

The council circulated a draft resolution Monday that expressed its willingness to consider the measures and reinforce other sanctions that include a ban on diamond exports by UNITA.

The resolution, which could be adopted as early as Tuesday, also condemns the downing of the two aircraft and demands that UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi cooperate immediately with a search and rescue mission and investigation.

Two UN-chartered C-130 cargo planes crashed within a week of each other over the central highlands of the south-western African nation as rebels and government troops intensified fighting beginning in early December. A total of 23 people were on board.

A UN team reached the site of the first crash on Friday, near Huambo, about 480 kilometers (300 miles) southeast of the capital, Luanda. The United Nations said Saturday there

was little hope of finding survivors among the 14 people on board.

In the draft, the council welcomes the help the government gave in reaching the site of the Dec 26 crash — territory which government troops regained in recent days.

The United Nations is still demanding the rebels allow

50 pc Russians approve death penalty

MOSCOW, Jan 12: A recent poll shows that 50 per cent of Russians oppose abolition of the death penalty, the Interfax news agency reported Monday, reports AP.

A similar poll conducted by the same firm in 1994 showed 37 per cent of Russians opposed its abolition.

The Russian government promised to eliminate the death penalty in 1996, when it joined the Council of Europe, but has so far only enacted a moratorium that prevents courts from carrying out executions.

Still, popular support for the death penalty appears to be growing.

them to reach the second crash site, believed to be in a mountainous area near the rebel stronghold of Bailundo, about 50 kilometers (30 miles) north of Huambo.

Most of the passengers on both planes were members of the UN observer mission in Angola, which has been overseeing implementation of the 1994 UN-mediated accord that ended nearly twenty years of civil war.

UNITA — the National Union for the total independence of Angola — stymied implementation of the deal by refusing to relinquish control of its central highland strongholds.

Last month, the government's army tried to take them by force but was beaten back.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan must decide this week whether he will recommend the council keep the force deployed in Angola in the wake of the intensified fighting and Dec 26 and Jan 3 crashes.

The United Nations has come under fire for failing to endorse sanctions on UNITA, particularly the diamond ban, which went into effect in July in an attempt to starve UNITA of money to finance the war.



Striking miners raise their hands to show their support for the decision to continue the strike in the city of Petrosani, 250 km southwest of Bucharest on Monday. Up to 10,000 miners gathered during a rally and decided to continue the protest against the government plans to close down some of the coal mines in the region. — AP/UNB photo