

## Japan, US to keep sharp watch on DPRK's further missile test

TOKYO, Jan 14: US Defence Secretary William Cohen and Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura reaffirmed their commitment Thursday to continue joint efforts to watch for any signs of further missile testing by North Korea, reports AP.

"We discussed the need for Japan, South Korea and the United States to deal cooperatively with the challenges posed by North Korea," Cohen told reporters after meeting with Komura.

In a separate news conference, Komura said he had suggested to Cohen that Japan, South Korea and the United States "should send a strong warning to North Korea if it shows signs of firing another missile," a Foreign Ministry official said.

Cohen was scheduled to meet with Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi late Thursday before flying to South Korea for meetings with top officials there.

On Wednesday, Cohen met with Japan's Defence Agency director general, Hosen Norota, and discussed a bilateral plan to build an anti-missile defence system to beef up security in Japan, a spokesman for the agency said.

## Israel threatens action against unilateral declaration of Palestinian state

PARIS, Jan 14: Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon told French foreign policy makers and experts Wednesday that Israel would take action if the Palestinians declared a state unilaterally, reports AP.

In a speech at the prestigious French Institute for International Relations (IFRI), Sharon stressed that Israel "wishes to avoid taking such actions."

Sharon, who is in France until Friday, made similar remarks in the Le Monde daily in an interview that was published Wednesday, the day his trip began.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has not said whether he will declare a state May 4, the target date set by the Oslo accords for completing a permanent peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

But Sharon said in his speech at IFRI any such action would be a "flagrant violation of the principles of the Oslo and Wye accords" that could lead both to a collapse of the peace process and retaliatory measures by Israel.

He told Le Monde that autonomy will lead to a Palestinian state, an objective that would be reached "negotiation and only under certain conditions," he said.

## Lankan police unveils LTTE plot to kill minister

COLOMBO, Jan 14: Sri Lanka's police say they have uncovered a Tamil rebel plot to assassinate the country's defence minister after arresting a would-be suicide bomber and his accomplices, a top police official said Thursday, reports AP.

The assassination of Gen Anuruddha Ratwatte was to have been carried out in Kandy, the holy city that houses a tooth Sri Lankan Buddhists believe is a relic of Buddha. Kandy is 90 kilometers (55 miles) east of Colombo.

Kandy's police chief Sirisena Herath told The Associated Press that the Special Investigation Unit, which is entrusted exclusively to investigate Tamil rebels, became suspicious when a teenager from the predominantly Tamil city of Vavuniya enrolled in a Kandy school late last year.

Police kept a close watch on Muhundam Logeswaran and one day picked him up for questioning.

Logeswaran, under sustained interrogation, confessed that he was assigned to ram an explosive-laden truck into a motorcade of the defence minister. Police also arrested a Tamil Hindu priest who had allegedly helped Logeswaran settle in Kandy.

## Kosovo rebels free 8 captive Yugoslav soldiers

LIKOVAC, Jan 14: Kosovo rebels freed eight Yugoslav soldiers Wednesday after getting private incentives from international officials who were determined to head off a return to war in the troubled Serbian province, reports AP.

The release, brokered by US and European mediators, defused a five-day showdown in which Yugoslav forces massed tanks and troops near the northern Kosovo village where the soldiers were being held. The Kosovo Liberation Army only agreed to the release after government authorities promised the mediators to free KLA prisoners within 10 days, the ethnic Albanian radio station Koha Ditore reported, citing sources close to the negotiations.

William Walker, the US head of international monitors in Kosovo announced the release after a final flurry of talks with Kosovo Liberation Army leaders at the rebel stronghold of Likovac in the hills of central Kosovo.

# Iraq rejects UN arms inspection for good

BAGHDAD, Jan 14: The UN weapons inspection team will never be allowed back into Iraq regardless of any changes that might be made to its leadership or its mission, Iraq said Wednesday, reports AP.

Iraq repeatedly has called the UN Special Commission a cover for espionage and has accused it of working to prolong UN economic sanctions against Iraq.

The Special Commission is now something of the past," Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan said at a news conference.

"Any talk about its future — whether it is to redecorate the ugly side of the commission or its work, or change its spies or their positions — is a waste of time," he said.

His comments came as France put a proposal before the UN Security Council in New York calling for lifting an oil embargo against Iraq but imposing a new monitoring system that would focus on preventing Baghdad from acquiring new weapons of mass destruction.

The UN weapons teams were withdrawn before US and British airstrikes against Iraq in mid-December.

The raids came after the commission released a report saying that Baghdad was blocking the work of the inspection teams.

Also Wednesday, Iraq said that Western aircraft violated its northern airspace and fired four missiles at civilian areas, hitting a house. The statement carried by the official Iraqi News Agency did not say if there were any casualties.

In Washington, Army Col Richard Bridges said US planes fired at anti-aircraft missile batteries.

Wednesday's incident in the northern "no-fly" zone was the seventh involving firing by US jets since Ramadan announced on Dec 26 that Iraq would shoot at warplanes patrolling the areas.

On Wednesday, Ramadan vowed that Iraq "will continue confronting this violation with all our means ... and at whatever cost."

The United States and its allies set up northern and southern no-fly zones to protect anti-government rebels after failed uprisings.

Arab FM's begin talks

Another report from Cairo adds: The foreign ministers of five Arab countries began talks Wednesday to try to forge a unified strategy on Iraq and its crisis with the West, Arab diplomats said.

Ministers from Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen met with their Egyptian counterparts, Amr Moussa, at secret location in Cairo, said the diplomats, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The meeting, the second in less than two weeks, came as Iraq proposed a dialogue with fellow Arabs on ways to find a solution.

The session is apparently intended to agree on a position to be taken at a meeting of foreign ministers from the 22 members of the Arab League scheduled Jan 24 in Cairo.

A similar meeting by Gulf Arab ministers is scheduled for Thursday in the Saudi Arabian port city of Jiddah.

In a tepid reaction, the State Department spokesman, James P. Rubin, said the French approach had some "positive elements." But he said Iraq should not be liberated from the sanctions until it rid itself of all weapons of mass destruction.

"We have a number of questions and concerns" about the French proposal, Rubin said. "The United States has always been skeptical and perhaps others are not as skeptical as we are" of Iraq's intentions.

Later, Vice President Al Gore, in a speech in New York City, said the United States "is willing to look at ways to improve the effectiveness of the humanitarian programmes in Iraq, including lifting current ceilings on funds which can be used to purchase food and medicine."

Gore, who was speaking to the Israel Policy Forum, a US-based lobbying group, did not say when the administration would make a decision or whether it would monitor how Iraq would spend the money.

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