

Division over UNSCOM's role on Iraq prevents UNSC accord

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 29: Divisions over the role of the UN Special Commission on Iraq prevented an accord on Thursday among the five permanent UN Security Council members, reports AFP.

Brazil, which holds the council presidency, convened the meeting to discuss Canadian proposals to break the deadlock, calling for three assessment panels to review aspects of the council's Iraq policy.

The draft Canadian proposals call for the panels to review Iraqi disarmament, the humanitarian situation, and the restitution of prisoners of war, Kuwaiti property and archives stemming from the 1991 Gulf War.

But diplomats said the main sticking point was the participation of UNSCOM in a disarmament evaluation.

A similar meeting on Wednesday pointed up some "sharp differences" in the positions of permanent members Britain and the United States on one hand, and China, France and Russia on the other, a Western Diplomat said.

While Britain and the United States agree with Canada's draft proposals, the three other delegations want to fix the objectives of the disarmament panel, to ensure it discusses the future of arms inspections in Iraq.

Talbott opens talks to prod India to sign CTBT

NEW DELHI, Jan 29: A top US official trying to prod India to sign the nuclear test ban treaty says his mission is also to improve overall relations between Washington and New Delhi, reports AP.

"We have the highest hopes for bilateral relations between the US and India. It's high time, I think, that this relationship should be on a much stronger footing than it has been for the last 50 years," Strobe Talbott, President Bill Clinton's point man on South Asia, told reporters at the start of his eighth round of nuclear policy talks.

He added Clinton had sent him to India "to make clear that this is his hope."

US-India relations have been bedeviled since India's independence five decades ago by Washington's suspicions that India, while declaring itself nonaligned, was in the Soviet camp during the Cold War, and by India's sense that a great power was attempting to dictate to it. India's nuclear ambitions have also long been an irritant.

"We don't assign to ourselves the task of telling India what it can, should, or must do in any respect, particularly on the most vital of all sovereign issues, that is protecting the security of the state," Talbott was

quoted as saying by the Indian Express newspaper today.

But Talbott said he was pressing his Indian negotiating partner, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, to elaborate on exactly what India means when it insists on a credible nuclear defence in the face of the threat it sees in neighbours China and Pakistan. Pakistan responded to India's tests with tests of its own last year, raising fears the regional arms race would spin out of control.

"It is our hope, in answering those cardinal questions of what constitutes sufficient and effective deterrence, what kind of military postures will truly enhance the safety of the Indian state, that India will choose to follow the path of restraint," Talbott said, adding both sides were showing new flexibility in the talks.

Talbott began discussions with India and Pakistan after both carried out nuclear tests last May that added another lethal dimension to their hostile relations. The two nations have fought three wars in the last 50 years.

Talbott's brief is to nudge India and Pakistan to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. He goes on to Pakistan

next week after his talks in India.

New Delhi says the test ban treaty favours the declared nuclear powers; Islamabad refuses to endorse it until India does.

Washington also wants the two countries to issue a formal moratorium on the production of fissile materials used to make nuclear weapons and adopt restraints on nuclear-capable missiles and aircraft.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has never clearly promised to sign the test ban treaty, but has said he hopes it would come into force by September. The treaty as it is now written cannot come into force without India's signature.

Instead, India has offered a no-first-use treaty to Pakistan, which rejected the offer since it is the weaker of the two in conventional forces. Both India and Pakistan have promised to refrain from more nuclear tests, but the United States says verbal promises aren't reliable or durable enough.

Both India and Pakistan also have worked to refine their weapons delivery systems since their tests. India proudly showed off its latest Agni and Prithvi missiles, both believed nuclear-capable, in a military parade Tuesday.

"We understand the Indian view that nuclear weapon is a currency of self-esteem," Talbott was quoted as saying. "But we hope that in the next century at least nuclear weapons lose their saliency for everyone."

Friday's talks opened the eighth round between Talbott and Singh. Talbott said it was difficult to predict when the nuclear talks would end.

The main change from the last few months is that the US seems willing to put dialogue on nonproliferation in a more broader framework, analyst C Raja Mohan said. "They are coming to terms with it."

Talbott is scheduled to meet with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Defence Minister George Fernandes today before resuming discussions with Singh that will spill over to Saturday, US Embassy officials said.

Sunday, Talbott will place wreaths at the memorial of Indian freedom movement leader Mahatma Gandhi, who was assassinated on January 30, 1948 by a Hindu fanatic.

Talbott is accompanied by Karl Inderfurth, the assistant secretary for South Asian Affairs, and US Air Force Gen Joseph Ralston on the tour.



Charles appears with Camilla in public, at last!

LONDON, Jan 29: After years of artfully dodging the lenses of the world's media, Prince Charles and his long-time lover Camilla Parker Bowles finally emerged together for the first time on Thursday, reports Reuters.

As the couple left London's exclusive Ritz Hotel by a side entrance the 150 or so photographers crowded across the narrow street gorged themselves on what until now had been the most elusive royal photograph of all.

Charles and Camilla, both smiling broadly, were bathed in flashlights as they walked down the stairs towards their black limousine a few minutes before midnight (0000 GMT).

As the two stood together on the pavement, Charles turned round and put an arm around his partner before helping her into the car.

Onlookers whooped and shrieked in delight as he heir to the throne walked round to his side and got in the car. The couple had been attending a birthday party for Camilla's sister.

Although the two were only outside for about 15 seconds the carefully-choreographed scene was of major significance for Charles, determined that Camilla should now be accepted as his partner in the wake of Princess Diana's death.

Britain's Prince of Wales and his long-term girlfriend Camilla Parker Bowles leave the Ritz Hotel in London Thursday after attending the 50th birthday party of Camilla's sister, Annabel Elliott. It is for the first time that the couple, who have been friends for more than 25 years, have appeared together in public. — AP/UNB photo

Cold wave grips northern India

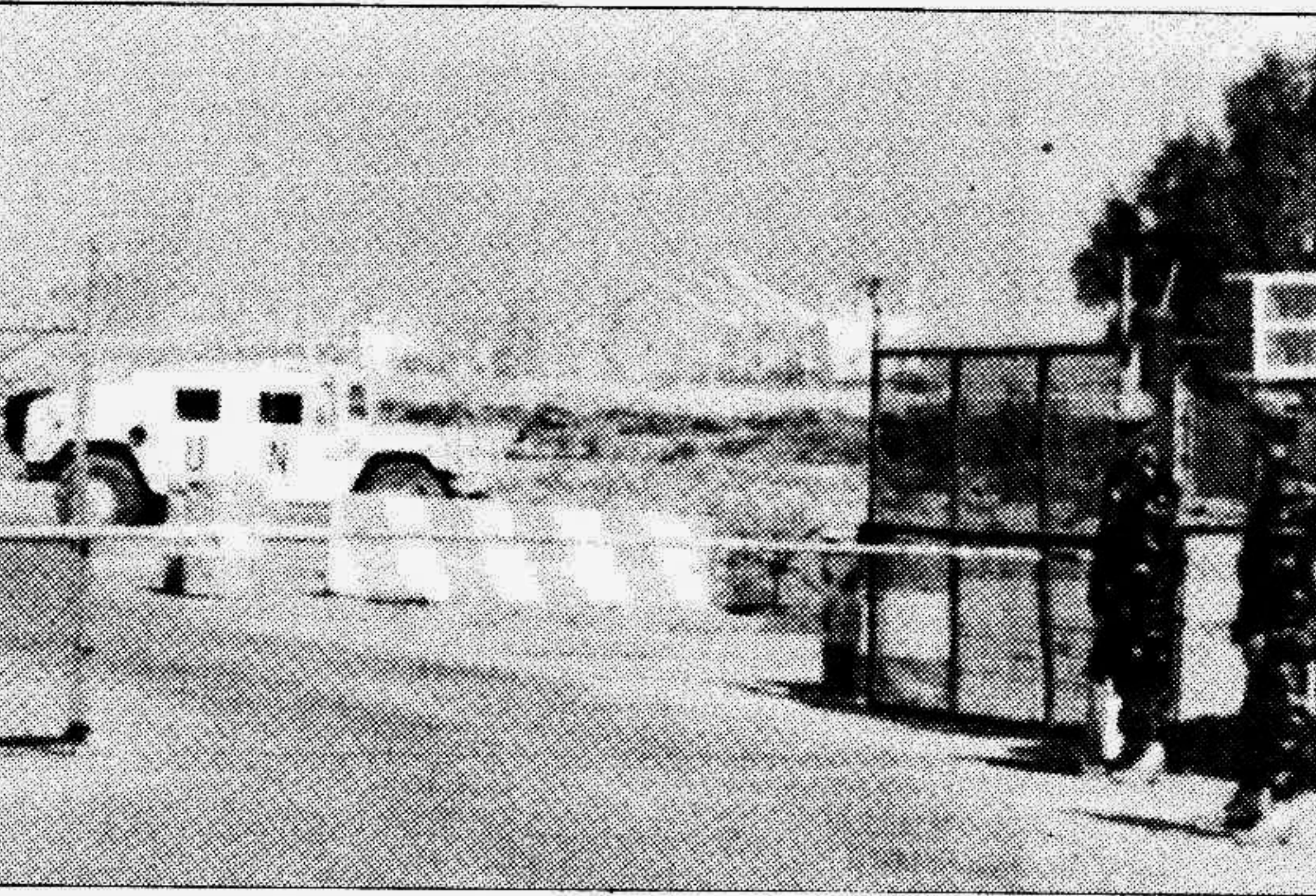
NEW DELHI, Jan 29: A severe cold wave gripped northern India today following intermittent heavy rains and snow triggering landslides which left hundreds of people stranded and sent the mercury plummeting down to minus 38 degree Centigrade, reports PTI.

The rains, however, brought cheers to farmers in Punjab and Haryana who feared loss of crops due to a more than month-long dry spell.

Meteorological department officials in Chandigarh said the rainfall lashing the region since last night recorded over 10 mm and the minimum temperature in Punjab hovered around nine degrees centigrade.

The mid and higher reaches of Himachal Pradesh experienced intermittent heavy snow since last night disrupting power and water supply and vehicular traffic in upper Shimla and interior of Mandi-Hills, reports from Shimla said.

Several hundred vehicles were stranded on the 300-km Jammu-Srinagar National Highway following landslides and heavy snow at different places, reports from Jammu said.



A Banbat (Bangladesh Battalion) vehicle of UNIKOM (United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission) patrols between Kuwait and Iraq, near a border post at Camp Khor, Kuwait on Thursday. — AP/UNB photo

King Hussein's health stable

ROCHESTER, Minnesota, Jan 29: King Hussein is undergoing chemotherapy at Mayo Clinic for his recurring cancer, but the 63-year-old monarch was out of his wheelchair Thursday, in good spirits and playing board games, reports AP.

Hussein spent six months at Mayo last year being treated for non-Hodgkins lymphoma before making a triumphant return to Jordan. But he returned abruptly on Tuesday for what Mayo announced was a relapse.

"His majesty King Hussein is receiving the necessary chemotherapy at the Mayo Clinic, which is part of a 10-day treatment programme intended to achieve a more remission," Hussein's private physician, Lt Gen Dr Samir Farraj, said in a statement issued through Mayo.

"The king remains fully aware," Muasher, Jordan's ambassador to the United States, said in an interview with The Associated Press. His mental powers are intact. He, of course, visits with relatives.

Pakistan for active US role in resolving Kashmir dispute

ISLAMABAD, Jan 29: Pakistan yesterday called for an effective US role in thrashing out a solution to the vexed Kashmir issue during the forthcoming talks of Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott with Islamabad, reports PTI.

"Pakistan is disappointed that no progress has been made towards the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, which is the principal item on the agenda of our talks with both the United States as well as India," Foreign Minister spokesman Tariq Altaf told reporters here.

He said Islamabad hoped that the issue would be discussed at length and progress made towards its solution during the eighth round of US-Pak talks beginning next week.

Pakistan and the United States will hold negotiations on the security situation and nuclear non-proliferation in South Asia during Talbott's visit to Islamabad on February 1. The spokesman said Kash-

mir was the main source of tension and instability in the region as well as key to the realisation of stable peace and security in a nuclear South Asia.

He said in the last seven rounds of US-Pak talks notable progress had been made towards the security objectives and non-proliferation in the region.

On sanctions, Altaf expressed hope that the US will lift the remaining embargoes imposed on Islamabad following its nuclear tests in May last year.

Tariq Altaf said in each of the previous rounds of talks, particularly during prime minister's meeting with President Bill Clinton, Islamabad had pointed out that the removal of sanctions against Pakistan was essential on grounds of equity and fairness and to create an environment conducive for the establishment of stable peace and security in South Asia.

Claiming that Pakistan and the United States had jointly endeavoured since the beginning of this decade to promote security and non-proliferation in South Asia, the spokesman said Islamabad and Washington had convergent approaches on a number of issues including the CTBT, export controls and other matters.

He said Pakistan continued to maintain a positive attitude towards international non-proliferation concerns following the nuclear tests, safeguarding its vital national interests and the need to maintain credible deterrence against what he alleged "Indian aggression."

"As a manifestation of this positive approach, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has explained Pakistan's readiness to adhere to the CTBT in an atmosphere free of coercion by September 1999 when the conference of state parties to the treaty is expected to be held," the spokesman said.

Pakistan alleges violation of its sea, air space by US

ISLAMABAD, Jan 29: Pakistan yesterday alleged that the United States naval ships and aircraft violated its sea and air space and lodged a protest with the US embassy, foreign office said, reports PTI.

"We have received reports of increased activities of US naval ships and aircraft in the vicinity of territorial waters in the past few weeks," foreign office spokesman Tariq Altaf told reporters.

"Activity has been noted in and around airbase and territorial waters is likely to cause disruption to our defence system. We have conveyed our concern to the US embassy in Islamabad," Altaf said.

An official of the US embassy was summoned to the foreign ministry and conveyed Pakistan's concern over the violation of its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), he said.

"We have declared the zone up to 80 nautical miles. However, the International Civil Aviation Organisation does not recognise this, he added.

"These alleged violation basically relate to the technical interpretation of the limit of our air space," Altaf said.

BRIEFLY

Sino-Indian border talks stalled: China has stalled the 11th round of Joint Working Group (JWG) meeting on the vexed border issue with India by refusing to agree on a date for the talks, diplomatic sources here said, PTI reports from Beijing.

"We have proposed dates for the convening of a preparatory meeting to be held ahead of the JWG, but there is not much response from the Chinese side," Indian diplomatic sources said. However, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue told newsmen on Thursday that the meeting would be held at a time 'convenient' to both sides.

Indo-British ties on the mend: Relations between India and Britain are steadily improving and the "misunderstanding" arising out of New Delhi's nuclear tests has been cleared, Indian High Commissioner Lalit Mansingh said on Thursday, PTI reports from London.

"The misunderstanding arising out of New Delhi's nuclear tests last May is behind us" and top leaders of the two countries would exchange visits shortly, Singh said at a function organised by the Indian Overseas Congress.

9 killed in bomb blast in China: A nail bomb explosion in central Hunan province killed nine and left 65 injured when it was detonated in a busy market square, officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

This was definitely a man-made explosion because there were nails inside the explosives, a spokeswoman for Yizhang county government told AFP.

Most Russians for burying Lenin: A solid majority of Russians believe it is time to bury Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Union who died in 1924, pollsters said Thursday, AP reports from Moscow.

Fifty-seven per cent of respondents to a nationwide survey said Lenin should be removed from public view on Red Square, and buried, the Public Opinion Fund said, according to the Interfax news agency. That is up from 55 per cent last July and 42 per cent in July 1997, the pollsters said. All three polls were conducted among 1,500 people nationwide. No margin of error was given.

Troops deployed to control looting Aftershock rattles Colombian city

ARMENIA, Colombia, Jan 29: A strong aftershock from Monday's deadly earthquake rocked this city in Colombia's central coffee-growth region early today, authorities said, report agencies.

A spokesman for the National Seismological Institute said no injuries or serious damages were however reported. The tremor, measuring 3.9 on the Richter scale, occurred at 1:06 am (0606 GMT), a spokesman for the institute said. He said its epicentre was located in an area somewhere just outside Armenia.

Meanwhile, thousands of government troops poured into this ravaged city Thursday following a night of looting by hundreds of people left homeless and hungry by Colombia's killer earthquake.

As President Andres Pastrana personally took control of relief operations, some 2,500 heavily armed army and police troops took up position in the city centre that had been the scene of overnight violence.

Pastrana said the destruction wrought by Monday's earthquake was far worse than initial estimates.

Official figures put the death toll at 742, with 3,000 people in-

jured, but rescuers expected the number of fatalities to be far higher.

Gunshots still echoed across the ruins Thursday morning, as residents took up arms to protect themselves from armed gangs that roamed the streets, stealing food, water or the few belongings the earthquake had not shattered.

Another report says: The 70,000 residents of this neighbourhood in Colombia town have received less attention than Armenia, but were equally desperate Thursday as they battled looters and hunger, and ran the risk of epidemics in the absence of any substantial aid.

"We are totally alone," said Mayor John Mairo Cobecha. "If the situation continues like this, in three or four days there will be nothing left of the city. The people will be killing each other."

After a night of widespread looting at Calarca's pharmacies, supermarkets and department stores, haggard town officials appealed for more aid and soldiers and sought to calm increasingly anxious residents.

The town's prison also was badly damaged and some inmates escaped.

Off the Record

The stickiest site on the web

NEW YORK: GeoCities is a place for cyber-homeowners, a service used by more than 3 million people to set up personal sites to tell the world about themselves, says AP.

It was the fifth most visited Web destination in December, according to the rating firm Media Metrix, with almost 19 million visitors. America Online's sites were first with about 31 million.

"If you listen to the executives at Yahoo!, that's what really impressed them," said Bruce Zanca, GeoCities spokesman. "The brand loyalty was one of the most attractive things about the company, the stickiness of the sites."

"Stickiness" is a term used as a measure of how long people linger at a Web site. News sites, for instance, have high stickiness because readers spend a great deal of time there.

A site with high "stickiness" is very attractive to advertisers.

But some critics say these "communities" don't necessarily result in "stickiness," and GeoCities is nothing more than a means of delivering people to advertisers.

Gunmen kidnap couple from Karachi airport

KARACHI, Jan 29: Gunmen kidnapped a young couple from the Karachi airport Thursday for marrying against the wishes of the woman's father — a powerful lawmaker in Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's ruling Pakistan Muslim League, officials said, reports AP.

Humera, 28, and her husband, US-based Pakistani businessman Mahmood Butt, were to leave for the United States when they were whisked away at gunpoint from Karachi Airport by six armed men, witnesses said.

Officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said they suspect the kidnappers were sent by Abbas Khokar, a member of Punjab state legislature. Khokar has accused the couple of adultery, saying Humera was still married to another man. Such a union is punishable by stoning to death under Islamic law.

Humera, who denied she is married to another, said her family threatened to kill the couple.

Pakistani law does not bar adults from marrying a person of their own choice. But in conservative feudal and tribal systems, which dominates most areas of the country, women are often killed for marrying against the wishes of their parents.

For a millennium baby

WELLINGTON: Couples seeking the ultimate status symbol of a baby born at the dawn of the year 2000 should seek to conceive on April 9, a New Zealand newspaper reported, says Reuters.

That matches up with the length of a human pregnancy," Richard Fisher, co-author of the book "making babies" told the Manukau Evening News.

However, he acknowledged the chance of having of the first babies born in the year 2000 was only around six per cent, even if the April date was acted upon.

"Most of fertility is random chance so you have to be lucky enough to be ovulating on that day, have intercourse, be lucky enough that particular egg wanted to fertilize and implant."

"And then you have to have a pregnancy that lasted exactly 35 weeks ... and then come into labour."

But Fisher also had a tip to help improve the chances — plenty of sex beforehand for the father.

Prospector set to take close-up view of lunar surface

MOUNTAIN VIEW, California, Jan 29: NASA's Lunar Prospector Probe, which has gathered a wealth of data including evidence of water on the moon since it began its mission last year, is now dropping into an even closer orbit to scan out new details of Earth's nearest neighbour, reports Reuters.

Principal investigator Alan Binder said controllers at NASA's Ames Research Centre in California would move the small probe into a 30-km orbit late on Thursday, giving its instruments an unprecedented, close-up view of the lunar surface.

"Lunar Prospector's five instruments gathered such superior data in the one-year primary mission at the 100-km orbit that we are very excited to get an even closer look," Binder said in a news release.

Lunar Prospector, which began its mission on January 6, 1998, went into a transitional 40-km orbit in December, its current, extended mission is expected to continue through July 1999.

Binder said the low orbit sweeps would allow Prospector to collect data at higher resolutions, enabling scientists to refine estimates of the amount of hydrogen present at the lunar poles — Prospector's most eye-catching finding.

US reinforces threat to use force France, UK ready to send troops to Kosovo along with NATO partners

PARIS, Jan 29: France and Britain are "ready to envisage sending troops to Kosovo along with their NATO partners," the French president's office announced late Thursday, reports AFP.

The forces would "accompany the putting into place of a negotiated accord," the Elysee Palace statement said.

The statement, issued after French President Jacques Chirac and British Prime Minister Tony Blair dined together in London, said the two had "discussed the deteriorating situation in Kosovo, especially after the horror of the Raecak massacre."

Chirac and Blair are "ready to envisage, with their partners and within the Atlantic Alliance, any military action, including sending ground forces, necessary to accompany the putting in place of a negotiated accord."

A British foreign office spokesman said that London was awaiting the outcome of today's Contact Group meeting in the capital before taking any decision on sending in ground troops.

There is no change in our position," he said. "We have to wait until after the Contact Group meeting."

However, a statement due to be released in London together with the French announcement said that "all the options" should be considered if a political settlement is not reached soon in Kosovo.

Meanwhile, Yugoslav federal troops and Serbian police pushed back separatist guerrillas of the Kosovo Liberation Army in fighting north of the provincial capital of Pristina Thursday, OSCE observers said.

Early in the day Belgrade's army took possession of snow-covered hills near Majance, some 20-km from Pristina, after seizing villages on the hill-sides Wednesday.

The action, accompanied by cannon and machine-gun fire, removed the immediate threat to the main road linking Pristina to the rest of Serbia from the KLA which is fighting for the independence of the largely ethnic Albanian-populated province.

AP adds: The Clinton administration on Thursday reinforced NATO's threat to use force to halt the conflict in Kosovo even as it promised to keep pressing both sides for a political settlement.

If Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic continues to refuse to withdraw his forces from the southern Serbian province "those threats may become very real," said White House spokesman Joe Lockhart.

Meanwhile, backed by a stiff NATO warning of possible military action, the six-nation group that oversees the Balkans is intensifying efforts for a political settlement to end the violence in Kosovo.

The Contact Group, made up of the United States, Russia, France, Britain, Germany and Italy, scheduled a meeting Friday to consider a new US initiative to bring peace to the Serbian province.

NATO stands ready to act and rules out no option," Secretary General Javier Solana said in Brussels. He made clear that those options included military attacks.

Chile promises not to shield Pinochet if sent home

LONDON, Jan 29: Lawyers for Chile are urging Britain's highest court to release Gen Augusto Pinochet, while also promising that the former Chilean dictator is not being given a "personal shield or umbrella" to protect him from prosecution at home, reports AP.

The Chilean government got its chance to speak Thursday before the House of Lords after lawyers for Pinochet concluded their arguments that the 83-year-old general enjoys immunity from foreign courts as a former head of state.

Pinochet was arrested October 16 in London at the request of a Spanish magistrate seeking his extradition to face charges of torture, hostage-taking and conspiracy to murder.

Human rights groups reacted angrily outside the courtroom. They contend Pinochet, who made himself a senator for life, would never be prosecuted in Chile because of an amnesty law he passed.

Meanwhile Reuters adds: Bolivia's Congress said on Thursday it will send Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzon a list of Bolivians who disappeared under the dictatorship of Pinochet in hopes of becoming a witness against him.



Armenian Gohar Arutyunian smiles after winning the Miss Commonwealth '99 contest, the first beauty contest involving girls from the former Soviet republics, members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, in Moscow on Thursday. — AP/UNB photo

Balloon flight Piccard gets green light from China

BERN, Jan 29: Bertrand Piccard and his Breitling "Orbiter 3" hot air balloon got the green light from Chinese authorities on Thursday to cross its airspace, reports AP.

The Chinese Embassy in Bern told the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs that the clearance to fly over China was subject to very strict conditions.

The Swiss government said it was grateful for China's decision, which will allow balloon pilot Piccard a final attempt at a nonstop round-the-world flight.

It will be Piccard's third round-the-world attempt. Last February, his second bid was abandoned after China refused his balloon entry, causing it to miss out on jet-stream winds needed to speed it over the Pacific.

Swiss watch company Breitling has said this is the last attempt it will sponsor.

Piccard and his partner Brian Jones of Britain are hoping to succeed where tycoon Richard Branson last failed.