

Dissent over price rises grows BJP braces for key meeting with coalition partners

NEW DELHI, Feb 2: India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under attack from partners in the coalition government for raising the prices of key commodities, braced today for a key meeting with leaders of allied parties, reports Reuters.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was due to sit in on the meeting with the support groups which make up his disparate 10-month-old coalition, as dissent over the price rises grew.

"BJP allies sharpen knives over prices," said The Hindustan Times ahead of the meeting, which was set for 12 pm (0630 GMT).

Vajpayee's BJP leads the coalition government, which has been racked by discord since it took office last March.

The government last week increased the prices of sugar, wheat and rice sold in rations through state-controlled shops and of cooking gas in a bid to trim its subsidy bill.

It also took on the powerful

farm lobby by raising the price of urea, a key fertilizer.

Three key support groups, including the southern All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), have said the decision to cut subsidies was an onslaught on the poor.

There is no justice in hitting the poorer sections harder and harder to make them pay for reviving the country's economy," AIADMK leader Jayaram Jayalalitha said in a statement.

Trinamul Congress, another regional supporter, threatened to launch a sit-in to protest against the price rise.

The southern Telugu Desam Party, which offers support to the coalition from outside, also turned up the heat.

"We want to discuss various options (within the party) and one of the options is to withdraw support," TDP spokesman Venkateswlu told reporters on Monday night.

He branded the price rises "unilateral, arbitrary and anti-



An Indian soldier with automatic weapon keeps vigil on Haran village, some 30km from Srinagar, Monday. Encounters between Kashmiri militants and the Indian army in which two militants have been killed so far began Sunday evening.

— AP/UNB photo

Indian media for speedy lifting of US sanctions

NEW DELHI, Feb 2: The United States should quickly lift sanctions imposed on India after its May nuclear tests and then resolve irritants such as New Delhi's opposition to a global test ban treaty, newspapers said today, reports AFP.

The Indian media, while welcoming weekend talks in New Delhi between Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh, said a first step would be the lifting to the US blockade.

Continuing sanctions in the current context is doing the relationship no good," the Indian Express said.

It said India's "good-faith" pledges on signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and its "excellent" record in not transferring "sensitive" technologies to other states, should be "more than sufficient" guarantees for Washington to remove the sanctions.

State Department spokesman James Rubin told reporters in Washington Monday that "the dialogue was productive and generated new momentum."

"There was encouragement on the part of our negotiators... there are some indications that the Indians are going to move in

a direction that will allow us to respond with moves to our own."

The United States wants India and Pakistan to sign the CTBT, but further fissile material production, strengthen export controls and exercise mutual restraint in missile and weapons development.

Expert-level meetings will be held in March for follow-up talks on export controls.

India's nuclear tests in May 1998 triggered similar tests by the United States. These sanctions were partially lifted in December.

The Pioneer daily, however, mirrored the Indian foreign ministry's line that there "was miles to go" before anything substantial materialised from the talks.

"There are a couple of steep hurdles," it said. "On the US side, it will mean the scrapping of the entities list banning exports to 40 Indian institutions by US firms and no longer blocking World Bank loans to the tune of 1.6 billion dollars."

"On their part, the Indian authorities have to work towards

creating a national consensus in favour of signing the CTBT."

India has traditionally opposed the CTBT, arguing that it was biased in favour of the five recognised nuclear powers. But Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has since pledged to sign the treaty before September.

The Hindustan Times said the eighth round of Sing-Talbott talks had achieved little and warned that signing the global treaty would spell doom for India.

Arguing that the move would "sanction technical espionage by the major powers" the editorial said it would neither "eliminate technology sanctions or the resistance to India's nuclear power status."

The Hindustan Times said signing the CTBT would not harm India "in a global situation where the idea of disarmament has been gaining wider acceptance," but added that Washington should recognise and make allowances for India to keep a minimum nuclear deterrent for its security.

"Washington must admit India's argument and take security perceptions in terms broader than south Asian security."

Fighting leaves 3000 dead in Sierra Leone

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 2: A rebel offensive in Sierra Leone has left approximately 3,000 civilians dead and created an acute need for medicine, health care and sanitation, a UN official said Monday, reports AP.

The humanitarian situation in the war-ravaged West African nation is "very serious" and likely to deteriorate further if fighting continues and aid workers remain unable to get to two-thirds of the country, said Kevin Kennedy.

Kennedy, who heads the emergency liaison branch in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and Abdul Majid Hussein, deputy director of the UN Children Fund's Office of Emergency Programs, visited Sierra Leone Jan 19-28.

Rebels renewed their offensive against Sierra Leone's democratically elected government in December, and fighting is still going on in the eastern part of the capital Freetown.

The government has accused Liberia of training and financ-

ing the rebels, and Kennedy said the United Nations is concerned that 12,000 Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone "may be unfairly targeted for their alleged sympathies with the rebel forces."

He told a news conference that uncertainty over the security situation two-thirds of the country.

"It is estimated that approximately 3,000 civilians have lost their lives, largely as a result of a deliberate campaign by rebels forces to terrorize the population, through forced amputations, shootings, house burnings and rapes," Kennedy said.

Aid workers have been unable to enter eastern Freetown, but flights over the area indicate that 80 per cent of the buildings have either been damaged or destroyed in the fighting, "so there's an urgent need for shelter," he said.

The United Nations is shipping plastic sheeting for 10,000 families, he said.

The situation in hospitals and clinics in central and west-

ern Freetown is "fairly desperate," despite the recent arrival of medical teams from Doctors Without Borders in France and Belgium and from Doctors of the World, Kennedy said.

After the main Connaught Hospital reopened recently, it received 300 cases requiring surgery in five days — mainly people wounded in the fighting or victims of rebel amputations, he said.

Medical teams in hospitals and 23 clinics opened in the last 10 days are unable to handle all the injuries and amputations, Kennedy said.

The food situation is serious but not acute and the price of the main staple, rice, which soared 300 per cent at the start of the fighting, has fallen to just above the pre-fighting cost, he said.

UN World Food Program warehouses in eastern Freetown were looted, losing about 3,000 metric tons (3,300 US tons) of food, Kennedy said.

Pinochet can't be tried in foreign courts: Lawyers

LONDON, Feb 2: Pressing their case for Gen Augusto Pinochet in Britain's highest court, lawyers for Chile are claiming that international laws allowing war crimes suspects to be tried in foreign courts don't apply to the former Chilean dictator, reports AP.

During times of peace, foreign courts can't trespass on other country's sovereignty as they did following World War II "under the rights of a victor to punish war criminals," Lawrence Collins, the lawyer for Pinochet, told House of Lords judges Monday.

Pinochet, who gave up power in 1990, was arrested Oct 16 in London at the request of a Spanish magistrate seeking his extradition to face charges of murder, torture and hostage-taking.

Judge Baltasar Garzon says Spaniards were among those slain after Pinochet toppled elected Marxist Salvador Allende in 1973.

Pinochet's lawyers, who are fighting his extradition to Spain, contend any acts committed during his 17-year regime would be protected by head-of-state immunity.

The government of Chile is also arguing that while it condemns the acts blamed on the

83-year-old general, the allegations are still not a matter for foreign courts.

"However odious and however deplorable, they were the acts of a sovereign power," Collins told the seven-judge panel on the ninth day of a hearing to determine if the general's arrest may stand.

Lawyers for Spain and human rights groups are relying heavily on an international law against torture, which they contend supersedes any of the general's claims to immunity. They also said the law gives every nation the right — and duty — to try any official accused of torture who is found in their country. Britain, Spain and Chile all signed the treaty.

But Pinochet's lawyers denied the torture law overrode immunity protections or gave outside nations the right to intervene. They also said the law applies only to crimes after it was endorsed in 1988. Most of the allegations against Pinochet date back before then.

Collins admitted Monday that Chile accepts that torture was prohibited under international law, even before the torture act was signed. Still, he said that Chile maintains that it has primary jurisdiction.

US urges Israel, PA to implement Wye river agreement

WASHINGTON, Feb 2: The United States on Monday said the failure of Israel and the Palestinian authority to meet a deadline under the Wye river peace accord was "very unfortunate" and urged both sides to implement the agreement, reports AP.

In addition, the State Department said Washington was investigating Israeli charges that the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had released from prison five Islamic militants involved in terrorist bombings which killed US citizens.

"As this time was not have any information that would confirm that any of the releases were individuals implicated in the killing of the Americans as suggested," Rubin said.

He said the charges were taken "seriously" but did not comment on whether such a release would affect any US role

in the Wye agreement.

However, he made clear US displeasure with the current state of affairs.

"We find it very unfortunate that the Wye river memorandum has not been implemented," he said, noting that Monday's deadline for the second phase of the accord passed without conditions being met.

The memorandum needs to be implemented," he said. It's essential that the problems that have arisen in the second phase of Wye while the Israelis had not carried out their part."

Rubin expressed US irritation over the fact that the two sides were seeking to blame the other for the failure to meet the deadline.

"Our focus is not on assigning blame but on getting the agreement implemented," he said.

Under the Wye river accord signed in October, Israel was to

withdraw from 13 per cent more of the West Bank in exchange for US monitored Palestinian crackdown on anti-Israeli violence — primarily by Islamic militants opposed to peace with the Jewish state.

Claiming the Palestinians were not honouring the deal, Netanyahu froze its implementation in December.

Rubin noted that the Palestinians had complied with some, but not all, of their obligations under the second phase of Wye while the Israelis had not carried out their part."

"The important point is both sides need to engage directly on the issues," he said, adding that the matter would be brought up with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat when he visits Washington this week.

Rubin's comments followed anger from US officials in the Middle East who accused Israel of trying to torpedo a planned

N-arms control Pakistan reports progress in talks with US

ISLAMABAD, Feb 2: Pakistan reported significant progress today on talks with the United States on nuclear arms control in the region, reports Reuters.

"I think we have significantly achieved our objectives; Pakistan Foreign Secretary Shamsah Ahmad said after talks with US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott.

Ahmad told reporters that a joint statement about the talks would be issued later and gave no further details about the eighth round of discussions between the two sides since Islamabad conducted nuclear tests last May.

Talbott said discussions with Ahmad and Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz were "very worthwhile." He is also due to meet Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif later today.

Pakistan wants all US sanctions imposed for last May's nuclear tests lifted before it will agree to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

China demands end to war in Afghanistan

PESHAWAR, Feb 2: China has no problem with Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and wants revival of old relations, reports AP.

This was stated by the in-charge of Asian wing in the Chinese Foreign Ministry in talks with Afghan Foreign Secretary Maulvi Abdul Rahman Waiz in Kabul Monday.

China demands an immediate end to war in Afghanistan and added that as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Beijing has been making efforts for early restoration of peace and security in Afghanistan.

Yeltsin celebrates 68th birthday ignored by most

MOSCOW, Feb 2: Boris Yeltsin celebrated his 68th birthday at a secluded government sanatorium Monday, visited by just a few dignitaries and largely ignored by the opposition, ordinary Russians and the press, reports AP.

The ailing president's wife, Naina, said she was planning to cook Yeltsin's favourite treats — cabbage pie and walnut cakes — for his birthday. But because of Yeltsin's stomach ulcer, they would likely be eaten by other members of the family, Naina said, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency.

At the Barvikha sanatorium, Yeltsin was visited by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Alexy II, Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov and presidential chief of staff Nikolai Bordyuzha.

Yeltsin has been a part-time president for months because of a string of illnesses.



A Pakistani woman, Humera Butt, second from left covering her face, appears in the Lahore High Court Monday. Humera and her husband Mahmood Butt, a naturalised US citizen, were arrested by police last Thursday as they tried to flee the country. Humera's father, a member of provincial assembly, filed a case against her for marrying a man of her choice.

— AP/UNB photo

Last batch of Khmer Rouge refugees leave Thai camp

PHU NOI REFUGEE CAMP, Thailand, Feb 2: A refugee camp that once hosted more than 14,000 supporters of Cambodia's dreaded Khmer Rouge was closed Tuesday when the final 1,000 occupants boarded trucks and returned to their homeland, reports AP.

"I'm happy that I can officially close down this camp," said Maj Gen Wiwat Sattarak, commander of the Thai army task force that oversaw the repatriation. "I'm optimistic about the situation in Cambodia, that there won't be any more fighting."

The refugees, mostly family members of Khmer Rouge guerrillas, had been in Thailand since a Cambodian government

offensive a year ago that captured their last major stronghold at Angkor Veng. The fall of Angkor Veng sent the fighters under the command of their one-legged general, Ta Mok, on the run along the border. Ta Mok is now considered defeated, following the defections late last year of nearly all his troops and two other senior Khmer Rouge leaders, Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea.

Thai officials said that about 700 of the final 1,000 refugees — many of them amputees and family members but also several fighting-age young men — were heading through the Aranyaprathet border checkpoint in Thailand.

NASA prepared to build contingency system for ISS if Russia fails

WASHINGTON, Feb 2: NASA is prepared to build a propulsion system and escape vehicles for the International Space Station (ISS) if Russia cannot meet its commitments to the 50-billion dollar project, the US space agency's chief said on Monday, reports Reuters.

At a briefing setting out details of the agency's 13.5 billion dollar budget for 2000, NASA administrator Dan Goldin said the United States had already started developing a 500 million dollar contingency system to propel the space station, in case problems develop with the propulsion system the Russians have agreed to provide.

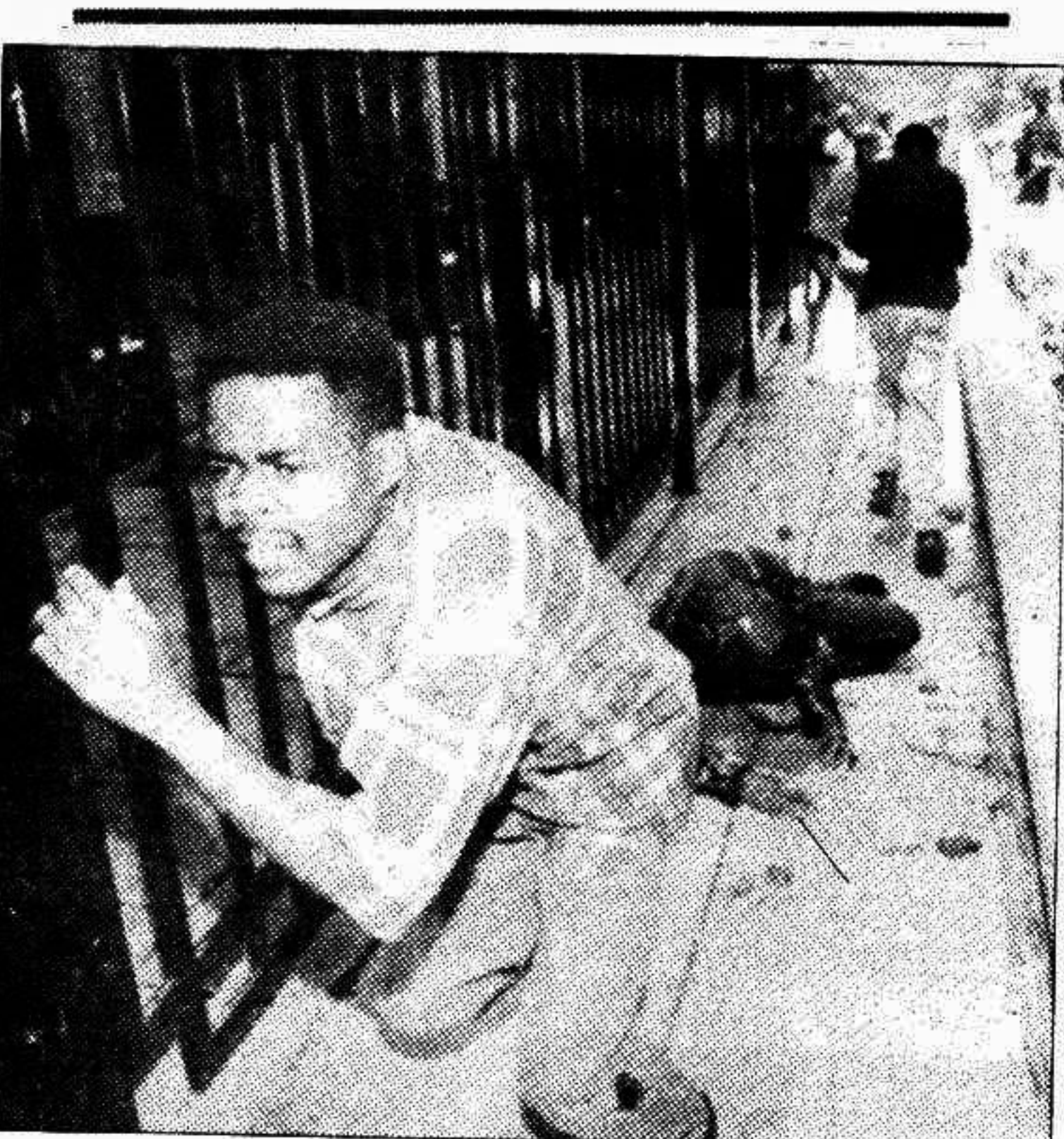
"We decided to move forward to mitigate adverse impacts on the station's operations if they can't meet their commitments

for supplying propellant and drygoods," Goldin said.

The budget calls for 200 million dollars for NASA's Russian Programme Assurance, the official name for the contingency plan.

The budget also sets aside 148 million dollars to develop so-called crew return vehicles, that will ferry people and supplies to and from the station.

BRIEFLY



A Nairobi University student takes to his heels after hitting a riot police officer in Nairobi Monday. Riot police fired teargas but failed to disperse students from two public universities on the third day of protests against construction of homes in a large section of Kenya's few remaining indigenous forests.

— AP/UNB photo

Suu Kyi supporter freed: Myanmar's military government announced Tuesday that an imprisoned supporter of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi had been freed out of consideration for his age. AP reports from Bangkok.

Ohn Myint, 81, was sentenced April 28, 1998, to seven years' imprisonment for working with underground organisations and trying to create rifts between authorities and rebellious ethnic groups, the government said in a statement.

Rebels seize Angolan town: UNITA rebels claimed Monday they had seized a town on a strategic road leading to the capital and foreign-owned oil fields, AP reports from Luanda.

Rebel forces drove government troops out of the town of Kiende on Saturday, days after taking the provincial capital, Mbanza Congo, 25 km to the east, according to a UNITA statement. Government officials were not immediately available for comment and there was no independent confirmation of the claim.

Albright meets Albanian PM: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met in Washington with Albanian Prime Minister Pandeli Majko to discuss economics, regional democracy and the Kosovo crisis, the State Department announced late Monday. AFP reports from Washington.

Albright and Majko held "productive discussions on Albania's democratic and free market economic reforms, on developments in Kosovo, and on US-Albanian relations," State Department spokesman James Rubin said in a written statement.

WW II bullet kills girl in PNG: Police in the island province of New Ireland have called on the United States to clean up abandoned World War II ammunition after a young girl was killed by an exploding bullet. AP reports from Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

The 8-year-old girl died on tiny Emirau Island, part of the St Matthias group of islands in New Ireland province, on Jan 31, police said Tuesday. The girl and members of her family were cooking in a traditional earth oven — a hole in the ground filled with hot stones — when bullets buried near the oven exploded.



Snow removal trucks clean up snow on Red Square in Moscow Monday following heavy snowfall.

— AP/UNB photo