

Russian FM denies media report on signing arms deal with Baghdad

Iraq capable of attacking US, British bases in the Gulf

BAGHDAD, Feb 15: The Iraqi government declared Sunday that it could attack American and British bases in the Gulf that are used to launch airstrikes against Iraq, reports AP.

"We, by help from God and support from the sons of our glorious Arab nation including true and sincere nationals... in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have the ability to attack the sources and means of aggression from whatever region," Iraqi television said, quoting a statement from President Saddam Hussein and senior leaders.

The statement came amid a simmering war of nerves with the United States and Britain over "no-fly" zones imposed in northern and southern Iraq. Iraq does not recognize the zones and has promised to fire at any plane that violates its air space.

The zones were set up by the United States, Britain and France after the 1991 Gulf War to prevent the Iraqi air force from attacking rebels in the north and the south. France later pulled out from the northern no-fly zone and suspended its operations in the south in December 1998.

Both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have opened their air bases to US and British planes that are getting involved now in a vicious and aggressive war that the people of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have no interest in," the statement said.

The United States says Iraq has defied the zones 90 times since mid-December by firing at patrolling planes or by sending its own aircraft into the zones. The United States and British forces have retaliated by attacking more than 40 Iraqi targets. Iraq says at least 27 people

have been killed in the allied attacks.

The Iraqi statement was issued following a meeting Saddam held with three senior aides. It again warned Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to distance themselves from the United States.

"Once again... we draw the attention of the rulers of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and tell them you are getting involved now in a vicious and aggressive war that the people of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have no interest in," the statement said.

It said the meeting reviewed the current situation and the circumstances involved in confronting the US and British aggression.

The statement did not specify what type of action Iraq would take against the US and

British bases. During the Gulf War, which was triggered by Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, Iraq fired long-range missiles at allied forces in Saudi Arabia.

The statement said more

blood was being shed now and this will eventually boomerang on Saudi and Kuwaiti rulers.

"The surge in the sea of blood between you and the Iraqi people... leaves you in an aimless situation in which suspicions and whims will drive you to the unknown," the statement warned.

Reuter from Moscow adds:

Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov denied a British newspaper report on Sunday that Russia had signed a secret deal with Baghdad to upgrade Iraq's air defences. Russian news agencies reported.

The Sunday Telegraphs re-

ported Russia had signed arms deals with Iraq worth more than 100 million pounds (162 million dollars) in a blatant breach of the United Nations arms embargo.

Quoting unnamed diplomatic sources in Moscow, the newspaper said Russia had agreed to upgrade and overhaul Iraq's ageing squadrons of Mig jet fighters and restore Iraq's defences to combat readiness. It said negotiations were also under way on supplying new air defence batteries.

"Russia is scrupulously adhering to all its commitments under UN resolutions on Iraq, and these resolutions do not allow for deliveries of such weaponry to that country," Russian news agencies quoted Ivanov as saying in Paris.

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(From L): Norway's current chairman of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), foreign ministers of Italy Lamberto Dini, Germany Joschka Fischer, Great Britain Robin Cook, France Hubert Vedrine, the US Madeleine Albright, Russia Igor Ivanov, and European Commissioner Hans van den Broek during a press conference of the Contact Group on former Yugoslavia in Paris Sunday. The Contact Group gave warring Serbs and ethnic Albanians another week in their peace talks to seek an end to fighting in Kosovo.

— AFP photo

Troops desecrate mosques in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Feb 15: In Indian occupied Kashmir, the troops desecrated mosques in Batmaloo locality of Srinagar on the pretext of siege and search operation which sparked furious anti-India demonstrations, reports AP.

The troops besieged six mosques, raided it with their boots on, sacked it and took into custody five people. Women of the locality, took out protest procession against the desecration of the mosques.

Killing in custody of two more innocent Kashmiris in Kupwara and rural areas of Jammu also triggered anti-India demonstrations. The victim in Kupwara was a Bank Manager, Ghulam Ahmed Pir and in Jammu rural area, a young man Muhammad Ismael. Protest procession was taken out in Kupwara and Muslim Federation sharply reacted in Jammu

against these brutal murders.

Over 50 people got injured when Indian troops opened fire on a peaceful procession at Achabal, in Islamabad (Anantnag) area, protesting against Indian repression. Six critically injured protesters had to be admitted to hospital.

A protest sit-in was staged at Naushera locality of Srinagar against arrest of innocent people. One person was shot dead at Kathigate in Srinagar and another at Lipura, in Pulwama area. Three people belonging to Jamat-e-Islami were arrested in Tral area.

Sabir Ahmed Soofi, nephew of the renegades ring-leader, Koka Paray was shot dead at Brar village, in Bandipura area. Koka Paray is also member of the so-called Srinagar Assembly. The Mujahideen clashed with troops at Thathri, in Doda district, reportedly killing

three soldiers.

Meanwhile, the puppet regime in Srinagar has announced scheduled of four-phased panchayat elections. Polls scheduled for Ladakh will be announced later.

The first-phase polls will be held on May 30, this year. Commenting on it, observers in Srinagar recalled that these polls would be as farcical as that of the so-called elections for Lok Sabha and Srinagar Assembly which were held at gunpoint.

They also recalled that a large number of Indian troops were sent to occupied Kashmir on the pretext of those polls and the coming panchayat polls might yet be another excuse for deployment of more troops to further increase brutalisation of Kashmiris, struggling for their right to self-determination.

BJP prefers fresh elections in Bihar

PALAKKAD, Feb 15: The BJP favours fresh elections in Bihar and is not interested in forming an alternative government in the state, reports PTI.

Once parliament ratifies

dismissal of the Rabri Devi government, the Bihar assembly, kept in suspended animation, would be dissolved and elections ordered. Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Pramod Mahajan said yesterday.

The BJP was not interested in horse-trading to form a government in Bihar, he told reporters here.

The house was kept in suspended animation in view of the Supreme Court order in the Bommai case that no assembly should not be dissolved unless the dismissal of a state government was ratified by parliament. Mahajan said.

Hoping the Congress would

extend support to the Vajpayee government in parliament over the issue, the said even Congress president Sonia Gandhi was of the view that the Rabri Devi government had no moral right to continue in the wake of recent killings in the state.

BJP adds: Bihar was today paralysed by an opposition-sponsored strike to protest against the sacking of the state government officials said.

Shops and businesses were closed and most traffic went off the roads in Bihar's capital Patna as the 12-hour shutdown got underway, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

The strike was called by the centrist party whose state administration was sacked Friday by the central government following massacres of poor farmers by an outlawed landowners' militia.

Cabinet rules out Mahathir's resignation

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 15: Malaysian cabinet ministers closed ranks behind Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, saying there was no question of his stepping down, reports Reuter.

Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar told Malaysian students on Sunday that Mahathir could not be expected to step down and become a senior minister like Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, who was once prime minister.

"As far as we are concerned, we still want Dr Mahathir to lead UMNO as well as leading the country into the 21st century," the official Bernama news agency quoted Syed Hamid as telling Malaysian students in London.

The foreign minister was referring to Mahathir's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which has led Malaysian governing coalition since independence in 1957.

New Sikh high priest takes over

AMRITSAR, Feb 15: Thousands of Sikhs gathered at their holiest temple Monday to watch an interim high priest take over leadership of the bitterly divided religion. The cleric, Puran Singh, was hospitalised soon after, complaining of chest pains, reports AP.

Dr Davinder Singh at the Sikh-run hospital in Amritsar said Puran Singh was under observation in the intensive care unit after suffering pain on the left side of his chest. The doctor added, Puran Singh's blood pressure was high.

Singh had appeared subdued but showed no signs of illness earlier, when he stood on a flower-decked platform at the doors of the Golden Temple, Sikhism's most sacred site.

Sikhism's 15-member governing body last week named Puran Singh, one of several deputy priests at the Golden Temple, interim head priest of the entire religion. He was to replace Ranjit Singh pending an investigation into charges Ranjit Singh sought to stir up separatist sentiment in Punjab.

Many people connected to official circles in Pakistan believe that the Taliban do know the location of the terrorist suspect.

Pakistan is a strong ally of the Taliban's and one of only three countries to give them official recognition as the government of Afghanistan.

One Pakistani source, who asked not to be identified because of his links to the government, said that bin Laden had fled to Chechnya. Bin Laden is believed to have financed Muslim militants who fought a bitter secessionist battle in the breakaway Russian republic.

Sixty-five per cent of those surveyed after Friday's Senate vote supported the acquittal, while 30 per cent thought Clinton should have been removed from office.

Sixty-two per cent of those surveyed thought Republicans in Congress pursued impeachment because they wanted to hurt Clinton politically; 34 per cent said Republicans were motivated by concern for the nation's legal and moral fabric.

Fifty-six per cent disapproved of the way the Senate handled the impeachment trial, and 57 per cent said the final debate should have been open.

Angola turns down UN political, military presence

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 15: The president of Angola has turned down a UN political or military presence, as the Security Council had requested, but wants UN relief workers to stay, diplomats said on Sunday, reports Reuters.

President Eduardo dos Santos, in a letter to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, also agreed to human rights monitors and said a special UN representative could visit the civil war-wracked country from time to time.

But he ignored requests for the special representative to be based in Angola and a small political military mission to remain in the country when the bulk of the peacekeepers leave, tantamount to a rejection, the envoys said.

He said that the prosecutor would disclose more information next week, IRNA reported.

Iran has been struck by a wave of violence, triggered by the intensified power struggle between supporters of hard-lin-

Kosovo peace talks given another week

PARIS, Feb 15: The contact group on the former Yugoslavia Sunday gave warring Serbs and ethnic Albanians another week in their peace talks in France to seek an end to fighting in the southern Kosovo province, French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine announced, reports AP.

The peace talks are taking place in a chateau in the town of Rambouillet southwest of Paris.

"Progress has been slower than we had hoped," Vedrine told reporters after the meeting, but added, "They did manage to sort out some of the basics."

The foreign ministers of the six-member group — Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the United States — met in Paris to evaluate the peace negotiations on Kosovo, which produced no discernible progress after the first week.

The meeting followed a working lunch devoted to Kosovo by the foreign minister

Off the Record

'The world hasn't invented anything better yet'

MINSK: An estimated 6,000 Belarusians marked St Valentine's Day with a simultaneous kiss that organisers said would land them a place in the Guinness Book of Records, reports Reuters.

"We're in love," said Oleg after a passionate embrace with fellow student Irina. "The world has not invented anything better yet."

Police said at least 6,000 people were present at Sunday's event, organised by local Guinness Book of Records representative Nikolai Tretyakov and staged in a sports arena on the outskirts of the Belarusian capital Minsk.

"Undoubtedly it is a new record. You all took part in it," one of the organisers told the crowd after they had smooched to the music of a specially composed song, "Kiss".

The contestants — mostly students and other young people — had set out to beat the previous record set by nearly 3,000 American students in Maine.

China reiterates calls for talks with Taiwan

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BEIJING, Feb 15: Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji on Monday reiterated calls for talks with Taiwan as soon as possible, state media said, reports AP.

Speaking at a reception to mark Tuesday's Lunar New Year, Zhu said reunifying China with the island it claims as a renegade province was "the common aspiration of the whole nation."

"We call on the Taiwan authorities to clearly see the way things are going, to hold political negotiations with us as soon as possible," the official Xinhua News Agency quoted Zhu as saying.

Zhu also urged Taiwan to "make practical efforts to formally end the state of hostility between the two sides under the principle of 'one China' and improve relations between the two sides."

ISLAMABAD, Feb 15: An Afghan leader maintained the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden were unknown Sunday, but other sources said the suspect in the bombing of two US embassies had fled to Somalia, Iraq or Chechnya, reports AP.

"We don't know whether he is in Afghanistan or whether he left the country," the Taliban militia's Radio Shariat quoted Mullah Mohammed Omar as saying. "The Taliban governs most of Afghanistan."

Bin Laden, who apparently dropped out of sight on Friday, has been indicted in the United States in the August embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania that killed 274 people.

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One Pakistani source, who asked not to be identified because of his links to the government, said that bin Laden had fled to Chechnya. Bin Laden is believed to have financed Muslim militants who fought a bitter secessionist battle in the breakaway Russian republic.

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Killing of dissidents, intellectuals

More suspects charged in Iran

TEHRAN, Feb 15: More suspects have been charged in the killing of dissidents and intellectuals in Iran, the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported.

A committee investigating the five deaths late last year has informed President Mohammad Khatami of the new prosecutions. IRNA reported late Sunday.

It did not say how many new suspects had been charged or whether they were in custody.

Iran's intelligence minister resigned last week following a Jan 5 announcement by the ministry that 10 of its agents were involved in the killings. Authorities later said that several of those suspects had been freed and others detained, but did not give exact figures.

IRNA quoted an unidentified member of the investigating committee as saying that the new prosecutions "might help clarify the issue" of the killings.

He said that the prosecutor would disclose more information next