

International

Palestinians, Israel resume 'final status' talks

NEVE ILAN, Israel, Nov 14: Israeli and Palestinian negotiators opened the latest round of final status talks to reach a permanent peace accord here this morning, reports AFP.

Chief Israeli negotiator Oded Eran and his Palestinian counterpart, Culture and Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo, refused to speak to reporters before the opening of the meeting in this village just west of Jerusalem.

Israeli public radio reported late Saturday that the two sides had agreed to tackle the tough issues in the talks simultaneously rather than break down the discussions point by point.

The final status talks are intended to reach a permanent agreement on the eventual borders of a Palestinian state, the question of Palestinian refugees, the fate of both Jerusalem and the Jewish settlements on the West Bank and the sharing of water resources.

Earlier Saturday the two sides remained at odds over a promised Israeli pullback from the West Bank due to take place Monday under September's landmark Sharm el-Sheikh peace accord.

The Palestinian cabinet demanded that Israel amend the proposed maps for the pullback to include populated areas, marking a significant toughening of the Palestinian position since talks with Israeli officials here Friday.

Mob attacks Christian prayer meeting in Delhi

NEW DELHI, Nov 14: A mob attacked Christians holding a prayer meeting and Bible study outside a church in New Delhi, beating up several worshippers, newspapers in the capital reported today, says AP.

The attack was carried out Saturday night by 15 to 40 people, including at least one local politician of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the reports said.

The mob, which may have had some BJP activists, disrupted the Bible reading session and then attacked the gathering, district police commissioner Amod Kanth was quoted as telling The Sunday Times.

"All the injuries sustained in the attack are minor," he said, adding that the mob tore and set fire to pamphlets praising Jesus, attacked and scuffed with those who were worshipping.

He denied newspaper reports from unidentified witnesses that Bibles were burnt and a cross was damaged. But police named four people in a warrant, including the alleged ringleader, Shyam Gupta, whom witnesses said was a local politician from the BJP.

Attacks on Christians have increased in India during the past two years, but the Times said it was the first such mob attack in the national capital.

Hindu groups that form the bedrock support of the BJP, which heads a coalition government, staged protests against the pope's visit last weekend, demanded an end to conversions to Christianity in India and asked the government to ban foreign missionaries.

The gathering outside an independent Church in west Delhi's Khya district was part of a three-day event "to spread the gospel," The Statesman newspaper quoted unidentified organisers as saying.

Supporters of Khatami launch polls campaign

TEHRAN, Nov 14: Supporters of Iran's reformist President Mohammad Khatami have formed an 18-party coalition in a bid to break the conservative grip on parliament in February's elections, the pro-reform press said today, reports AFP.

The new coalition of political religious and professional groups is calling itself the Second of Khordad Front, referring to the date of May 23 in the western calendar when Khatami was elected president in 1997.

The Front is headed by the Association of Combatant Clerics, Khatami's party and the reformist counterpart of the conservative Association of Combatant Clergy.

It also includes the Kargozran, or Executives of Construction, of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and four left-wing groups, among them the Workers' Union and Jebhe-e-Mosharekat, or Partners' Front.

The various groups have formed a "general staff" headed by former minister Behzad Nabavi, whose aim is to reach agreement on joint candidates for each of the 290 seats in the Iranian parliament.

A coordinating council has also been set up, headed by Mohammad Musavvi Mohammad Khoenia, former director of the reformist newspaper Salam, whose closure in July by caused the worst riots since the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Other components of the Front include the main students' organisation and associations of school, university teachers, doctors, business heads and women.

Nabavi confirmed Sunday that the Association of Combatant Clerics had named former vice president Abdollah Nuri as a candidate for the February elections, even though -- or because -- he is awaiting sentence by a conservative court on an array of serious charges.

Nabavi noted however that conviction by the hardline Special Court for the Clergy would bar him from running.

UN sanctions imposed on Taliban

Protesters attack US embassy in Kabul

KABUL, Nov 14: The United Nations ignored last-minute pleas from Afghanistan's Taliban army and imposed sanctions today to demand the arrest of suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden reports AP.

Within two hours of the sanctions taking effect, thousands of protesters swarmed into Kabul's rocket-ruined streets burning US flags and shouting "death to America", said eyewitnesses.

The demonstrators demanded sanctions be lifted and accused the United Nations of being a "puppet to the United States."

In Kabul where early morning temperatures Sunday barely climbed to freezing, residents who spoke to The Associated Press complained bitterly about the United Nations and United States.

"The Afghan people are dying... it is an unfair decision for the Afghan people," said a schoolteacher Mohammed Ibrahim, who lives in a sunbaked mud home. His family home was destroyed several years ago by relentless fighting between rival Islamic factions who took control of Kabul from the former communists.

About 70 per cent of the capital lies in ruins, ravaged by four years of factional fighting that

over to the United States or a third country to stand trial on charges he masterminded last year's twin bombings of US embassies in East Africa.

Attorney-General Marzuki Darusman told the daily on Saturday he had received the instructions to proceed with the investigations from Wahid while in Washington on a private visit.

"I think he wants to tell everyone that he is genuinely against corruption, and is doing something to stem the tide in the government," Marzuki said.

"He is trying his best to win the confidence of the business community in particular so that they will be comfortable enough to put their money back into Indonesia," he added.

He declined to name the three ministers, who will remain suspended during the investigation.

Efforts to set up clean government has been one of the key reformist demands and Wahid pledged to fight corruption when he was elected by parliament in October.

The airline made its last international flight late Saturday, when a plane carrying 14 tons of cargo flew in from Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates.

Russian troops closing in on Grozny

GROZNY, Russia, Nov 14: Russian troops have entered the rebel stronghold Bamut but do not have control of the town, a spokesman for the Chechen presidency said Selim Abdulmuslimov said early today, reports AFP.

He confirmed Russian claims Saturday that federal troops had entered the town in western Chechnya, which was a key hideout for rebel fighters during the last conflict opposing Russia and the breakaway republic (1994-1996).

Abdulmuslimov said that Chechen military units "fought off three attacks by Russian troops who were trying to take control of Bamut."

Russian forces have been pounding the town with bombs and artillery fire for several weeks.

Bamut, nicknamed the "imperial fortress" by Chechen rebels, is famed for its resistance during the last conflict. The Russians made several bloody attempts to seize the town, but did not succeed in wresting control until May 1996.

Russian forces were also continuing to close in on the Chechen capital on three separate fronts with troops between five and 15 km from the city.

Heavy aerial and artillery bombardments of Grozny overnight killed five people and wounded seven, according to Chechen military spokesman Vakha Ibragimov.

The vast majority of the capital was without water, electricity or gas Sunday, forcing residents to melt snow for drinking water and break up furniture to

use as fuel rather than venture out into the war zone for supplies.

In Moscow, Russian President Boris Yeltsin was due to meet his Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Sunday ahead of the OSCE summit in Istanbul November 18-19, Itar-Tass reported.

The White House confirmed Friday that US President Bill Clinton would meet Yeltsin during the summit, where Russia is likely to face increasing criticism for its hardline insistence on a military rather than a political solution to the crisis in Chechnya.

The local authorities said six other people were reported missing in the area after witnesses saw cars falling into overflowing rivers and being swept away.

Two people were killed in the eastern Pyrenees region.

Wahid orders corruption probe against 3 ministers

SINGAPORE, Nov 14: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid has ordered three ministers to be investigated for alleged corruption in a bid to demonstrate his commitment to clean up government, Singapore's Sunday Times reported, says AFP.

The United Nations recognises Rabbani's government which now operates in barely 10 per cent of Afghanistan. The Taliban who espouse a harsh brand of Islamic law, rule the remaining 90 per cent of the country.

The UN sanctions against Afghanistan come into force at the stroke of 1100 BST Sunday or midnight Eastern Standard Time in the United States. The Security Council did not consider a postponement which was sought by Kabul.

The sanctions will prevent Taliban-controlled Ariana Afghan Airlines from landing or taking off overseas and will mean the freezing of Taliban accounts abroad.

Ariana carries nearly all the country's post and handicraft exports and is a key link to Afghan expatriates working in the Gulf.

The airline made its last international flight late Saturday, when a plane carrying 14 tons of cargo flew in from Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates.

Floods in France: Hundreds evacuated

TOULOUSE, France, Nov 14: Hundreds of people were evacuated from threatened villages in southwest France yesterday after heavy floods and mudslides left 19 dead and nine missing, officials said, reports AFP.

A mother and her three children died when their house was buried under a mudslide in the town of Labastide-Rouairoux, in the Tarn department. A homeless man also died in Tarn.

With rain still falling, worst hit was the Aude region, where the death toll hit 12 on Saturday.

Among the dead were two people in the village of Estagel, near the southern city of Perpignan, which was buried in up to two metres (six and a half feet) of mud. A merchant navy officer fell off a German boat off the coast near Narbonne.

The local authorities said six other people were reported missing in the area after witnesses saw cars falling into overflowing rivers and being swept away.

Two people were killed in the eastern Pyrenees region.



Women trying to keep themselves warm near Duzce, northwestern Turkey Saturday following a powerful earthquake on Friday. —AFP photo

More survivors found in Turkey

Quake toll rises to 374

ANKARA, Nov 14: At least 374 people were killed and 2,923 others injured in the powerful earthquake that struck northwestern Turkey on Friday, Health Minister Osman Durmus said in a statement early Sunday, reports AFP.

In his statement, carried by the Anatolia news agency, Durmus said that the toll could rise as rubble-clearing work in the quake zone continued.

Five people in the town of Duzce, the epicentre of the tremor with a magnitude of 7.2 on the Richter scale, were saved more than a day after the quake struck.

A father and his two children were extracted from the rubble of their home early Sunday 30 hours after it was razed to the ground.

Mehmet Aykut, his son Ozgur and his daughter Ozlem were immediately hospitalised, the Anatolia agency reported. It did not give details of their condition.

Late Saturday, coal miners from the Black Sea province of Zonguldak pulled a mother and daughter alive from under rubble more than 24 hours after the earthquake, the news agency reported.

Murvet Durukan, 60, and her 29-year-old daughter Ilknur were dug out from the second

floor of a multi-storey building after eight hours of intense work that commenced at noon Saturday, the report said.

The two women were immediately taken to the local hospital, but there was no immediate word on their condition.

Earlier Saturday, rescuers in the quake zone also found two university students.

In Kaynasli, a town of about 7,500 inhabitants where the health ministry said most of the casualties occurred, a volunteer doctor from Istanbul explained that people trapped under the debris in temperatures as low as two degrees Celsius (36 degrees Fahrenheit) could survive "at most three days."

Hypothermia would more quickly set in on the human body in a state of shock, Levent Oztan said.

Meanwhile, hundreds of people left homeless after the earthquake -- which razed some 300 buildings according to preliminary figures -- were camping out in the open for a second night.

Meteorologists warned the cold but dry weather would be replaced by rains from next week, which would further add to the misery of survivors.

N Ireland parties set for 'final' peace talks

BELFAST, Nov 14: Northern Ireland's rival political parties are preparing to resume Monday what the US mediator George Mitchell has called the "final and critical stage" in talks to salvage the peace process, reports AFP.

About 200 Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) guerrillas stormed the village of Tibao in Mlang town, North Cotabato province, killing a pro-government militiaman and wounding four others before taking hostage the villagers.

Five MILF guerrillas were also killed and seven were wounded in clashes in nearby municipalities as two major rebel camps came under heavy mortar fire from the military, military and rebel commanders said.

Town Mayor Luigi Cuerpo said the guerrillas herded the hostages into a Catholic church and the men were ordered to dig foxholes near a highway, where MILF forces had set up blockades to prevent government troops from advancing.

The guerrillas threatened to shoot the villagers if they fled, but allowed them to leave unarmed, later Cuerpo said.

The attack came two weeks after formal peace negotiations were launched in late October to hammer out an accord to end the MILF's 21-year insurgency to set up an independent Islamic state in the south.

In Manila, Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado accused the rebels of violating a cease-fire agreement and warned the latest attack "could endanger the peace talks."

The 27 senior figures are considered to be among the

most liberal members of the party.

The party's 900-strong Ulster Unionist Council -- which is expected to meet on November 27 -- include hardline members who fiercely oppose moves to form a cross-party government with the IRA's political wing Sinn Fein before the paramilitary begins disarmament.

Trimble has until the November 27 meeting to decide whether to try to sell the deal to the council.

Press reports on Sunday suggested that Trimble might be ready to risk a split in the party in order to put the proposals to the wider membership.

Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson let it be known Saturday that he was ready to tour the troubled province to rally support for the proposals among grass-roots UUP members.

Republican politicians and much of the British press urged Trimble to grasp the deal, which many Irish nationalists say will not be bettered.

Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein, appealed Saturday for a new style of leadership in the key Protestant party.

Sinn Fein argues that the 1998 Good Friday peace accord, which enshrines the whole process and was chaired by Mitchell, gives them until May 2000 to disarm.

Adams recognised that the UUP leadership faced a "huge burden" if it sought to change the party's conviction, which has been characterised throughout the months of wrangling by their "no guns, no government" mantra.

Malaria vaccine to be ready in one or two years

CARACAS, Nov 14: Colombian physician Manuel Patarroyo announced Wednesday in Venezuela that in the next year or two he would have a vaccine against malaria, which would also serve as model for efforts against other infectious diseases that wreak havoc in the developing world, reports IPS.

"We will donate all of these vaccines to humanity," said Patarroyo, who burst onto the international scientific scene in 1987 with a formula to prevent malaria that has proven to be 30 to 50 per cent effective in clinical tests carried out in several countries.

The researcher donated the patent to the World Health Organisation (WHO), and said he would repeat the gesture if the discovered new vaccines.

On a visit to Caracas to participate in "Colombian Month in Venezuela", Patarroyo gave a speech in the Institute of Tropical Medicine on his experiments with synthetic vaccines.

Clinical tests that followed showed that the vaccine led to advances

in knowledge of the behaviour of the parasites that cause malaria, which in turn made it possible to move forward in the search for a 100 per cent effective vaccine, he said.

In a speech sprinkled with a liberal dose of humour, Patarroyo said malaria resulted from a sequence of 20 links that he described as "tiny hands". The vaccine keeps those tiny hands from hooking up.

"In one or two years, we will come up with a definitive result, a 100 per cent effective vaccine against malaria," announced Patarroyo, whose research was conducted in the Institute of Immunology in Bogota.

Some 300 million people contract malaria annually worldwide. Between 150,000 and 180,000 of these cases occur in Colombia, and around 50,000 in a Venezuela. The disease claims 5,000 lives a day throughout the world.

But "science is an ongoing process," the researcher pointed out, explaining to medical students, academics and reporters in Venezuela that the key to his