

International

Jyoti Basu to oppose presidential system

CALCUTTA, Dec 8: West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu would oppose any move by the BJP-led government at the centre "to replace the existing parliamentary system with a presidential one", reports AFP.

"I have been consistently opposing such idea, and I feel the present government at the centre will fail before such a move is taken", he said yesterday.

Basu made the observation when pressmen asked for his comment on the reported move by the centre to that effect during a special four-day session of parliament to mark the 50th anniversary of the republic.

Asked about the continuance of LK Advani, Murli Monohar Joshi and Uma Bharti in the union cabinet despite their alleged involvement in Babri Masjid demolition, Basu said, "if this be their morality, what can be done."

Clinton sees hopeful signs in solving Kashmir dispute

WASHINGTON, Dec 8: President Bill Clinton said on Tuesday that he saw some "hopeful signs" of a possible resolution of Pakistan and India's bitter conflict over the Kashmir region, reports Reuters.

"I look forward to making a real stab at that the next year," Clinton told a fund-raiser for Sen. Tim Johnson, a South Dakota Democrat.

The dispute over control of Kashmir has sparked two of the three wars between India and Pakistan, and the conflict continues to shadow relations between the two countries.

"The Indian subcontinent would have limitless potential in the 21st century if the differences ... can be reconciled," Clinton said, directing his comments to a handful of Pakistani-Americans in the audience.

The Clinton administration has repeatedly warned both Pakistan and India against resuming testing nuclear devices.

Johnson, who is up for re-election in 2002, is trying to get a jump on boosting his campaign war chest to improve his chances in what he has said is likely to be a difficult race.

He hoped on Tuesday to rake in \$300,000 from about 50 supporters.

Russian troops storm key gateway toward Grozny

MOSCOW, Dec 8: Russian troops stormed a key gateway toward the rebel capital Grozny today despite appearing to soften a deadline of less than 72 hours for the city's terrified inhabitants to flee or risk death, reports AFP.

As bombs continued to rain down on Grozny, where an estimated 40,000 civilians are cowering in underground cellars, federal forces launched an assault on the rebel stronghold of Urus-Martan some 20 km to the southwest.

The attack was being commanded by the Russian chief of operations in western Chechnya, General Vladimir Shamakov, federal military headquarters said, cited by Interfax.

The ex-Grozny mayor Bislam Gantamirov, leading Chechen forces opposed to the separatist leadership in Grozny, also took part in the operation.

Moscow said that up to 2,000 Chechen rebels are holed in

Urus-Martan, one of the last two towns controlling roads out of the capital.

NTV television, citing official Russian military sources, reported that the federal troops had taken control of the southwestern part of the town and that fighting was continuing.

The operation came as Russia appeared to respond to a wave of global condemnation prompted by its warning that all civilians remaining in Grozny by Saturday would be considered "terrorists" and obliterated.

The European Union, United States and United Nations all warned Russia about its actions in Chechnya, while the IMF delayed the release of fresh funds for Russia, though without mentioning Chechnya.

In an indication of an easing of Moscow's stance, General Viktor Kazantsev, commander of Russian troops in the north Caucasus, said the Russian army warning to get out of Grozny was aimed only at the "bandits" and not at civilians.

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But Russian aviation continued Wednesday to pummel Grozny, which stands 80 per cent in ruins from Russia's three-month aerial onslaught, after a relentless overnight barrage of bombs and rockets.

In the past 24-hour period, Russian SU-24 bombers and SU-25 attack planes carried out 90 sorties over the breakaway republic. Attack helicopters also flew 60 missions, the federal press centre said, cited by Interfax.

Federal troops around Grozny have fully encircled the capital and have fortified their positions, where 6,000 Chechen rebels are dug in, military officials said.



Indonesian House Speaker Akbar Tanjung (2nd L) assists President Abdurrahman Wahid (2nd R) down the stairs after a hearing with parliament leaders in Jakarta yesterday, along with Wahid's daughter Yenny Zannubah Arifah (R). Akbar Tanjung and other parliament leaders summoned Wahid to the chamber to voice their concerns over mounting separatist demands in the northern province of Aceh and the easternmost province of Irian Jaya.

—AFP photo

Indonesian parliament urges HR court for Aceh abuses

JAKARTA, Dec 8: Indonesia's parliament called today for a tribunal to try those suspected of human rights violations in Aceh and warned the country was facing a "crisis" over growing separatism, reports AFP.

The Pakistani embassy said the general was to hold talks with Bahrain's emir, Sheikh Hamdan bin Isa bin Khalifa.

Musharraf, who toppled prime minister Nawaz Sharif in an October 12 military coup, was to travel on to Tehran late Wednesday to meet Iranian President Mohammad Khatami and spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Relations between Tehran and Islamabad have been strained over the protracted civil war in Afghanistan in which the two governments support opposing sides.

The general has already visited Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Turkey on two previous tours of fellow Muslim countries.

Sharif's son, Hassan, was in Qatar and Saudi Arabia earlier this week to rally Gulf support for his father to be given a "fair trial," Gulf newspapers said.

He called on the government

not to impose martial law in Aceh but to hold talks with "all components of the people there to achieve a comprehensive solution."

Indonesia's top generals have been wary of any trial covering abuses during its nine-year campaign against the separatist Free Aceh Movement in which an estimated 2,000 people have been killed, including 300 this year.

But analysts said such a trial was crucial for the new government to regain its credibility among the Acehnese.

He defended his many foreign trips since taking office, saying that his visits to several Asian countries and the United States had been intended to garner support against separatism.

The president has been criticised at home for spending most of his one month in office on overseas trips.

Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono on Tuesday said the government was willing to talk with separatist leaders and other groups in Aceh but warned it would impose martial law if the situation deteriorates.

Israel hints at freeze in settlements

JERUSALEM, Dec 8: Prime Minister Ehud Barak said Tuesday that Israel would put a break on new construction in Jewish settlements after the Palestinians warned more building could derail crucial peace talks, reports AFP.

The Palestinians are angry that settlement expansion under Barak has continued at a greater pace than under his right-wing predecessor Benjamin Netanyahu.

Anti-settlement group Peace Now says Barak's government has issued tenders for almost 3,200 units in Jewish settlements since taking office in July, exceeding an average of around 3,000 a year by Netanyahu.

The fate of around 170,000 Jews living in some 140 settlements across the West Bank and Gaza Strip is one of the most contentious issues to be tackled in talks to reach a final deal by September.

A top aide to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat expressed scepticism Tuesday over Barak's comments.

"This is an ambiguous position. It is not enough. We want all settlement activities to be stopped in order to restore credibility to the peace process," Nabil said.

But she added: "It would be too strong to speak of a freeze in settlements."

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The conflict erupted after the Levy's ministry announced plans to build a further 500 homes for Jews in two West Bank settlements, angering Palestinians who say interim peace agreements call for a halt to building work while negotiations are underway for a final peace.

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Musharraf in Bahrain

MANAMA, Dec 8: Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf started a visit to Bahrain today on his third trip to the Gulf since seizing power in October, the official news agency GNA said, reports AFP.

The Pakistani embassy said the general was to hold talks with Bahrain's emir, Sheikh Hamdan bin Isa bin Khalifa.

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US missile sale to Taiwan likely

TAIPEI, Dec 8: Washington is close to selling Taiwan advanced air-to-air missiles that the island has wanted to buy for several years, the Taiwanese military said Wednesday, reports AP.

Defense officials are optimistic that Washington will permit the sale because the United States recently agreed to sell Taiwan software to guide the missiles, a defense ministry spokesman said, confirming a report in the local media.

However, it was not known if Washington has a timetable for the sale of the missiles, the official said, speaking on customary condition anonymity.

Washington appears to be seeking to lessen the chances of Taiwan's rival, China, blocking the sale, gradually handing over technology for the AIM-120 missiles, the local China Times quoted air force official Shen Yuan-tai as saying.

A late night meeting of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Cabinet on Tuesday cleared 16 long-pending proposals that the ruling coalition promised to take up soon after coming to power, including a law to help speedy recovery of bank loans and another tightening real estate regulations.

The bills will now be brought before the two houses of Parliament to be discussed and voted on.

A new legislation proposes to amend India's copyright law framed in 1952 that experts say is obsolete, and bring it in line with global intellectual property rights regulations.

The decisions were taken after India's parliament passed a landmark bill to open up India's massive, state-owned insurance industry to domestic and foreign private investors. Also Tuesday, the government said it would review its decades-old policy banning foreign investment in Indian newspapers.

The Cabinet cleared the po-

Indian cabinet okays bills to create 3 new states, ban lotteries

NEW DELHI, Dec 8: With many promises to keep, India's Cabinet approved Parliament to outlaw all lotteries, amend intellectual property laws and create smaller states for better governance, Wednesday's newspapers reported, says AP.

Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party has promised the new states for years, saying this will help better govern the poor regions they cover. But the move has strong opponents in several parties, including some in his ruling coalition.

However, the toughest move is the ban on lotteries, for which a bill is likely to be introduced in the ongoing session of Parliament and is expected to provoke nationwide protests from sellers.

When Interior Minister Lal Krishna Advani declared in Parliament last year that the trade would be banned, the country's largest body of lottery traders threatened that tens of thousands of sellers would hold demonstrations and petition the courts if the prohibition went through.

Vajpayee's government collapses before it could carry out the promise, and the coalition was reelected in October.

Lotteries lure millions of poor people in India each day to spend their paltry earnings.

Computer experts warn of self-updating virus

NEW YORK, Dec 8: Computer security experts warned Tuesday of a new virus that can update itself with potentially malicious instructions from a Web site, reports AP.

The first of its kind, this virus primarily affects home computers and spreads through Microsoft software used for chat rooms. The W95.Babylon virus comes disguised as a Y2K fix, making it the sixth known virus preying on the Year 2000.

Britain's most successful movie, "Notting Hill" starring Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant, failed even to make it into the top 100.

The newest movie in the list is "The Blair Witch Project," which was only released in Britain in October, at 66. The oldest is "Gone With The Wind" at 12, dating from 1939.

Robert De Niro features in six of the top 100 films with Harrison Ford and Sir Alec Guinness in five each.

The female stars most often in a chat room using MIRC software, the virus gets sent as a Y2K fix to anyone else in that chat room. If the user accepts the software, the virus will install itself and later obtain several files from Japan. Those files, in turn, carry instructions affecting the user's computer.

"There's nothing else even close to it," said Vince Gullotto, director of Network Associates' anti-virus research team.

Vincent Weaver, anti-virus research director at Symantec Corp., said the virus can spread by e-mail as well, though home e-mail use is not as heavy as that of businesses. Thus, he said, this virus is not likely to spread as quickly as other viruses.

Discovery of the new virus comes days after experts detected a virus timed to erase disks on January 1 by posing as a Y2K problem. All told, there are three viruses known to trigger the new year.

Three others spread by posing as Y2K software and act immediately.

Scientists claim breakthrough in developing AIDS vaccine

SEOUL, Dec 8: A team of South Korean scientists today claimed a breakthrough in developing DNA vaccines to protect human beings against the virus that leads to AIDS, reports AFP.

A spokesman of the team said that Jean Marie Andrei of Laennec Hospital in Paris planned to visit here early next year to discuss human trials of the vaccination in France along with South Korean pharmaceutical company.

Other scientists here conceded that the vaccine may represent a major breakthrough in the fight against AIDS, caused by HIV (human immunodeficiency virus).

But they cautioned that it was too early to say whether the

vaccine could be applicable to humans.

By using genes from an HIV-like virus found only in monkeys, the research team at Pohang University of Science and Technology here developed a vaccine which "protected completely" monkey against the virus, called SIV-239.

"This finding will open new possibilities to both prevent and cure AIDS in humans," Sung said.

"Human trials" of a modified form of the vaccine will be carried out in the middle of next year, he said.

"It is generally admitted among scientists should a vaccine protect monkeys against SIV-239, it would be highly possible for the vaccine to protect human beings against HIV as well," Sung said.

In the early stages of the experiment, the vaccinated monkeys showed signs of infection. But later the vaccine stimulated the immune system, keeping the level of the virus under control.

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