

## Mahathir to announce new cabinet today

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 9: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who won an unprecedented fifth mandate in polls last month, will announce his new cabinet on Friday, the official Bernama news agency said, reports Reuters.

Mahathir will meet the King to present the proposed cabinet and hold a news conference to reveal the members of his new government, it said.

Ministers will be sworn in on Tuesday.

Mahathir's 14-party Barisan Nasional coalition won a three-quarters majority in the lower house of parliament in the early general elections, held on November 29.

But his United Malays National Organisation, the coalition's main party, lost ground to the Islamic fundamentalist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) in parts of the Malay heartland in the north and east of Peninsular Malaysia.

Mahathir was not expected to make major changes in his cabinet.

# China backs Russia's campaign against Chechnya

BEIJING, Dec 9: Russian President Boris Yeltsin, just out of hospital after a bout of pneumonia, met Chinese President Jiang Zemin today and won immediate and powerful backing for the military campaign in Chechnya, report agencies.

Jiang, who greeted the 68-year-old Yeltsin in Russian, asking "How are you old friend?" before embracing him in a bear hug, said he fully supported the Chechnya campaign, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said.

"Jiang Zemin completely understands and fully supports Russia's actions in combating terrorism and extremism in Chechnya and in the northern caucuses," Ivanov told reporters.

He was speaking after a ceremony in which he and Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan signed two border demarcation agreements on the east and western borders, as Russian

President Boris Yeltsin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin looked on.

Yeltsin and his entourage, including his wife Naina and daughter Tatyana Dyachenko, arrived in Beijing earlier Thursday for an informal summit aimed at clinching China's support for the Russian offensive in Chechnya.

## Yeltsin warns Clinton

BEIJING, Dec 9: Russian President Boris Yeltsin warned US President Bill Clinton on Thursday not to interfere over Chechnya, pointing out that Russia still possessed nuclear weapons, reports AFP.

"It seems Mr. Clinton has forgotten Russia is a great power that possesses a nuclear arsenal. We aren't afraid at all of Clinton's anti-Russian position," Yeltsin said after an informal summit with Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

"I want to tell President Clinton

that he alone cannot dictate how the world should live, work and play. It is us who will dictate."

Yeltsin, who was speaking loudly and animatedly, made the comments to journalists gathered outside a hall where he was scheduled to meet with China's second in command, Li Peng.

Clinton has warned Russia that it will pay a high price for the way it is waging war in Chechnya, in particular its disregard for civilian casualties.

International outrage at the Russian offensive on Grozny reached a peak this week after Moscow issued an ultimatum to some 40,000 inhabitants to flee the capital or face annihilation.

But, China, a consistent supporter of Russia on matters concerning territorial integrity, said earlier this week the Chechnya war was Russia's internal affair.

Yeltsin is also scheduled to meet with Premier Zhu Rongji and National People's Congress chairman Li Peng later Thursday.

The leaders are expected to discuss international terrorism, attempts to provoke ethnic conflicts, and the international community's participation in such conflicts.

The two sides also signed Thursday an agreement on common economic usage of the islands on the Amur River (Heilongjiang in Chinese) on the two countries' eastern border.

From this moment onward, there is no more problems on the border issues. This is a new step in our strategic partnership," Ivanov said.

He said the agreements should not be seen as anything directed against the United States or Europe.

Russia and China also agreed in principle to join hands in fighting separatism and religious extremism, Ivanov said.



Russian President Boris Yeltsin (L) and Chinese President Jiang Zemin toast each other after the signing of border agreements between the two countries in Beijing yesterday. China and Russia signed agreements on demarcations of their eastern and western borders, as to end all border disputes between the two countries. — AFP photo

## Syria, Israel agree to hold peace talks soon

WASHINGTON, Dec 9: Syria and Israel agreed on Wednesday to hold high-level peace talks next week in Washington in a dramatic attempt to resolve their bitter 32-year-old dispute over control of the Golan Heights, President Bill Clinton announced, reports Reuters.

"We are at a pivotal moment in the Middle East peace process, one that can shape the face of the region for generations to come," Clinton told a news conference in announcing what he called a "significant breakthrough."

As outlined by Clinton, under the agreement, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara will meet for one or two days in Washington then return to the region for intensive negotiations at a site to be determined.

White House officials said the Barak-al-Shara meeting was likely to take place in mid-week. Officials were hastily trying to arrange a site for them.

It will be the highest-level talks ever held between Israel and Syria, which is demanding that Israel turn over the strategic Golan Heights seized during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The previous talks between the two countries were at the chief of staff level.

Clinton created some confusion by saying the talks would resume "from the point where they left off" when Israel broke off the previous negotiations in early 1996.

Israel and Syria disagree on where the talks left off. Syria says Israel pledged a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights. But Israel says it made a hypothetical offer to see what Syria would give in return.

Clinton did not say whether Israel had undertaken to return the Golan Heights to Syria, and he declined to be drawn out on the question, saying he had taken a "blood oath" not to discuss details out of fear of jeopardising the negotiations.

Albright, on her Middle East

shuttle mission, obtained from Syrian President Hafez al-Assad a message for Barak containing what a senior US official called "new clarifications on important points."

The official did not elaborate but diplomats in Damascus said Albright got answers from Assad on four crucial issues.

They were: A potential Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, the nature of future peace ties between Syria and Israel, the security arrangements that would follow a pullout and finally a timetable, the diplomats said.

Barak, who has re-energised the peace process since taking over from Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister last July, has said Israel is ready to make "painful compromises" to achieve peace with Syria.

"There's kind of a sense that the time is right for these talks to come together, but nobody has any illusions about how difficult they're going to be," Albright told CNN.

## Russians poised to seize last Chechen stronghold

SHALI, Russia, Dec 9: Russian troops were poised Thursday to seize the last rebel stronghold outside the besieged Chechen capital as the clock ticked away towards a deadline for Grozny's inhabitants to flee or face death, reports AFP.

Federal forces were holding back from entering Shali, 20 km southeast of Grozny, despite assurances from local residents that rebel fighters had retreated from there, Chechen military sources told AFP.

Instead they were deploying reconnaissance units, fearful that Chechen fighters remained in Shali.

On Wednesday, Russian troops seized Urus-Martani, southwest of Grozny, one of the last two towns controlling roads out of the breakaway capital, where an estimated 40,000

civilians are trapped under Russian bombardment.

As world outrage over Russia's brutal campaign to bring Chechnya to heel intensified, a top general vowed to blast Grozny to shreds before sending in troops to take the city.

On Monday, the Russian military dropped leaflets over the capital telling civilians to leave by Saturday or risk being wiped out by a massive aerial and artillery onslaught.

Russian deputy chief of staff General Valery Manilov said his troops would not enter Grozny before it had been reduced to rubble.

"There will be no assault against Grozny," 80 per cent of which is already in ruins from Russia's three-month aerial onslaught, he said in an interview with state ORT television late

Wednesday.

Instead the city would be seized "by those means that have already shown their efficiency, especially during the second stage of the anti-terrorist operation in Gudermes, Achkhoy-Martani, Argun and Urus-Martani," he added.

Over the past few weeks, Russian forces have seized these key rebel strongholds after weeks of punishing aerial and artillery bombardment which left them in ruins and forced Chechen fighters to beat a tactical retreat.

The general confirmed that there was a strong chance that "the bandits will be using (the) peaceful population as a live shield in Grozny. That is the elementary and classical tactic of terrorists and bandits."



US President Bill Clinton answers a question during his last official press conference of 1999 at the State Department in Washington, DC, on Wednesday. President Clinton said Israel and Syria will meet for peace talks in Washington next week, and he reiterated his support for one-China policy. — AFP photo

## Pakistan, Iran to 'coordinate' policies towards Afghanistan

TEHRAN, Dec 9: Iran and Pakistan will "coordinate" their policies on Afghanistan, where they support opposing sides, to establish peace in their joint neighbour, Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf said here today, reports AFP.

"On Afghanistan, we agreed to coordinate the policies of our two countries for encouraging the peace process through reconciliation and dialogue among the Afghan parties," Musharraf said in a statement faxed to the AFP bureau in Tehran.

"We reaffirmed our support for the establishment of a broad-based, representative, and multi-ethnic government in accordance with the wishes of the Afghan people," he said.

"I have no doubt that the traditional friendship between

our two countries will continue to promote deeper and broader cooperation in all spheres. Pakistan-Iran collaboration is fundamental to regional peace and stability," Musharraf stressed.

The Pakistani leader arrived in Tehran late Wednesday on his first trip to Iran for talks with senior Iranian officials, including President Mohammad Khatami and Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi, when both sides stressed the need to bolster ties between their two countries.

Early Thursday, Musharraf held a meeting with Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei before leaving the capital for the eastern city of Mashhad, close to the border with Afghanistan.

Informed sources said the

Pakistani leader would meet Afghan opposition members for talks on the political situation in Kabul.

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

Islamabad is a major backer of the Sunni Muslim fundamentalist Taliban militia, which control most of Afghanistan.

Iran supports the ousted Afghan government of Burhanuddin Rabbani and assists the Afghan opposition, especially its Shiite component.

But since Musharraf's coup on October 12, Islamabad has issued reconciliatory-sounding statements.

## Japan to cancel key rocket programme

TOKYO, Dec 9: Japan announced on Thursday that it will halt development of the troubled H-2 rocket, considering the key to its space programme — after two failed launches this year, reports AP.

Japanese media prominently reported the decision of the Science and Technology Agency, with the nationally-circulated Sankei newspaper calling it a huge setback to Japan's space programme. Japan is competing with Europe and the United States for a share of the commercial satellite-launching market.

Japan is aiming to become a world leader in aerospace technology, but has been plagued over the past few years by bureaucratic wrangling, cost overruns and technical difficulties — including with the H-2.

The agency has decided that the National Space Development Agency of Japan, or NASDA, should concentrate instead on developing the next generation of rockets — called the H-2A — in the wake of the November failure of an H-2 to put a satellite into orbit, science agency spokesman Toru Nakahara said Thursday.

## No fighting during Ramadan, says Taliban

KABUL, Dec 9: Afghanistan's ruling Taliban said today they would not launch any fighting against opposition forces during the month of Ramadan, reports AFP.

The Taliban control Kabul and most of the country but are battling opposition troops who hold two northern provinces and the Panjshir Valley, 100 km north of the capital.

"We will not initiate fighting during Ramadan," said Mawlawi Masoom Janan, head of the Taliban commission for crossline operations.

Ramadan began Thursday in Afghanistan.

In a rare agreement the Taliban and opposition forces have agreed to allow UN humanitarian convoys across the frontlines, 45 km north of Kabul.

## Two killed in Aceh violence

JAKARTA, Dec 9: A policeman and a civilian have been killed and two other police officers are missing and feared dead in a new wave of violence in Indonesia's restive Aceh province, reports said today, reports AFP.

A traffic policeman was shot dead Wednesday by an unidentified group of four in the Muara Dua subdistrict, five kilometres (four miles) from the main North Aceh town of Lhokseumawe, the Banda Aceh-based Serambi daily said.

The Kompas daily said police on Wednesday shot at two civilians while they were riding on a motorcycle in Pidie district, killing one of them and wounding the other.

Aceh police chief Bachrum-syah Kasman told Kompas that police officers opened fire after they were attacked.

Two other policemen kidnapped by unidentified suspects on Monday remained missing and were most likely to have been killed by their abductors.

## Drug prevents heart attack during surgery: Study

BOSTON, Dec 9: Drugs widely used to treat heart disease may prevent more than 90 per cent of heart attacks in people undergoing surgery, researchers report in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine, reports Reuters.

In tests on 112 surgery patients facing a high risk of heart attack, researchers discovered that only 3.4 per cent of those pre-treated with a beta-blocker drug suffered a heart attack versus 34 per cent who did not receive the medicine.

In this study, the beta-blocker was bisoprolol, sold under the brand names Zebeta and Ziac by Lederle Laborato-

ries, a unit of American Home Products.

The research team, led by Don Poldermans of the Erasmus Medical Centre in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, studied patients undergoing surgery at one of seven medical centres to repair an artery in the groin or abdomen. Ultrasound tests showed all 112 had a high risk of heart problems.

The effect of bisoprolol — begun at least one week before surgery and continued until 30 days after the operation — was so dramatic, the study was halted early so all the patients could receive the drug.

## US orders expulsion of Russian diplomat

WASHINGTON, Dec 9: The United States ordered the expulsion of a Russian diplomat after he was detained by the FBI in connection with a listening device discovered hidden at the State Department, US officials said, reports AP.

The male diplomat, whom officials would not name, was caught Wednesday trying to use the listening device, one official said. The diplomat may also be a suspect in planting the device, which was found some time before the arrest, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering informed the Russian embassy that the United States had declared the diplomat persona non grata and wants him expelled by the end of the week, another US official said.

That official, also speaking on condition of anonymity, said the FBI and the State Department's Diplomatic Immunity Service had been watching the diplomat, who was described as not a high-ranking embassy employee for some time.

A third official said the Russian embassy employee claimed diplomatic immunity shortly after the FBI and State Department security officials detained him. He was then turned over to the custody of the Russian embassy, the official said.

As a result of the immunity claim, the diplomat cannot be charged with a crime.

The listening device was found in what more than one official described as a "sensitive area" of the State Department, but officials would not specify when or where. They also gave no indications of what US government secrets may have been compromised.

## Off the Record

### Clinton, Hillary to live separately

WASHINGTON: President Bill Clinton confirmed on Wednesday that he will live separately from his wife Hillary for the next year while he serves out his presidential term and she campaigns to be elected senator for New York, reports AFP.

"I'm happy for her," Clinton told a press conference, when asked about the first lady's decision to run for election as one of the two senators for New York state.

"She was encouraged to run by many people and she decided she wanted to do it. And if she's going to do it, she's got to spend a lot of time in New York."

The first lady recently mentioned that she was ready to move out of the White House to take up residence in a New York suburb in a matter of weeks.

"It's not the best arrangement in the world but it's something that we can live with for a year," Clinton said. "I've got a job to do, and she now has campaign to run, and so we'll have to be apart more than I wish we were."

"We always make it a habit to talk at least once if not more every day," he said, adding that as he would visit his wife in New York and she would come down to Washington. "We'll be together as much as we can."

# Martin Luther King was victim of conspiracy, jury decides

MEMPHIS, Tennessee, Dec 9: A jury hearing a lawsuit filed by the Rev Martin Luther King Jr's family has found that the civil rights leader was the victim of a vast murder conspiracy, not a lone assassin, reports AP.

The King family had sued Loyed Jowers, a retired businessman who claimed six years ago that he paid someone other than James Earl Ray to kill King in Memphis in 1968. The family's lawyer claimed that the FBI, CIA, the Mafia and the military were involved.

The family wanted the jury to find evidence of a conspiracy and lend support to their call for a new investigation into the killing. Prosecutors have long said that they are convinced Ray fired the fatal shot and that they could find no evidence anyone else was involved.

The Kings asked for only a token amount in their wrongful-death lawsuit. After three hours of deliberations, the jury of six blacks and six whites

awarded the family \$100 in damages on Wednesday.

"I'm just so happy to see that the people have spoken," King's son Dexter said. "This is what we've always asked for."

Ray confessed to shooting King and was sentenced to 99 years in prison. He spent the rest of his life claiming to be innocent and trying to get a trial. He died of liver disease last year.

Ray's guilty plea was upheld eight times by state and federal courts. A congressional committee concluded in 1978 that Ray was the killer but that he may have had help before or after the assassination from a St Louis-based group of bigots. The committee did not find any government involvement.

William Pepper, the Kings' lawyer, told the jury that Jowers, 73, was part of a conspiracy involving the Mafia and federal agents to kill King because of his opposition to the Vietnam War and plans for a huge march

on Washington.

In his closing argument, Pepper said the order to kill King came from the head of organized crime in New Orleans to a Memphis produce dealer who got Jowers to handle the payoff and murder weapon. An Army sniper squad was in place to shoot King if the Mafia hit failed, Pepper claimed.

The FBI, CIA, the media, Army intelligence and state and city officials helped cover up the assassination, said Pepper, who also represented Ray in his efforts to get a trial.

Pepper called witnesses who claimed that King's police protection was pulled back moments before the shooting, that Army agents had him under surveillance and that a police officer who was at King's side after he was shot later went to work for the CIA.

Juror David Morphy said he believed the assassination was too complex to be carried out by one person.

"We all thought it was kind of a cut-and-dried case, with the evidence that Pepper brought forth that there were a lot of people involved, everyone from the CIA, military involvement in it — Jowers was involved in it, we felt," he said.

Lewis Garrison Jowers' lawyer told the jury that while they could reasonably conclude King was the victim of a conspiracy, his client's role was minor at best.

In 1993, Jowers told ABC that he hired King's killer as a favour to an underworld figure who was a friend. He did not identify the purported killer, but said it wasn't Ray.

Jowers, who has never repeated the claim but has not recanted it either, was sick for much of the trial and did not testify.

In 1968, Jowers owned a small restaurant, Jim's Grill, across the street from the Lorraine Motel, where King was killed.