

Major powers discuss building N-power plant in N Korea

TOKYO, Dec 13: Officials from the United States, South Korea, Japan and the European Union met in Tokyo today to discuss building a nuclear power plant in North Korea, a Japanese official said, reports AFP.

The executive board members of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO) were joined by Charles Korman, the US special envoy for peace on the Korean Peninsula, the official said.

"A key issue of the meeting is a contract to start building a light-water power reactor in North Korea," the Japanese official said.

KEDO was set up to provide Pyongyang with two light-water nuclear reactors and consignments of heavy fuel oil for heating and electricity under a 1994 agreement between Pyongyang and Washington.

In exchange for the reactors and fuel, North Korea agreed to freeze its own nuclear power programme which produced plutonium capable of being used in weapons.

KEDO announced in October in New York that it was ready to begin the 4.6-billion-dollar project following Pyongyang's decision to freeze its nuclear missile program in exchange for an easing of sanctions.

US Ambassador to Japan Thomas Foley told a news conference at the Japan Press Club that he strongly backed the KEDO program.

Rebel leaders urge troops to leave Aceh

JAKARTA, Dec 13: Separatist rebels in the troubled province of Aceh on Monday urged remaining Indonesian troops to withdraw "immediately" after fresh guerrilla attacks left four policemen injured, reports AFP.

"Save your lives as well as your family somewhere else ... or else we Acehese people will drive you out totally," Tengku Darwis Djennib, the rebels commander in Aceh's Batee Ilek district, said in a statement sent to AFP.

He urged Indonesian security forces to "immediately leave Aceh-Sumatra."

Djennib accused the Indonesian police (Polri) and military (TNI) of becoming "more brutal in slaughtering Acehese people."

"TNI and Brimob stationed in Aceh are morally destroyed people, this is proven in this holy month of Ramadan, with Muslim residents who are being shot and beaten," he said.

Their presence in Aceh have caused all kinds of calamity for all Acehese people."

The warning followed an attack on Sunday in Batee Ilek area of Bireuen in Aceh in which four Indonesian policemen were injured.

The daily media Indonesia said rebels opened fire and threw grenades at the elite police Brimob truck as they were headed back to their post.

"They were admitted into the emergency unit before dusk ... one of them is in critical condition," Soraya, a member of staff at the Zainal Abidin General Hospital told AFP from Aceh's capital of Banda Aceh.

Indonesian special forces from the elite Kopassus unit were ordered withdrawn from Aceh in October. They were replaced by the elite Brimob battalion of the police.

LTTE steps up pressure ahead of polls

COLOMBO, Dec 13: Tamil Tiger rebels have stepped up pressure on government forces with more long-range attacks in northern Sri Lanka ahead of next week's crucial presidential elections, officials said today, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) failed in their latest bid to overrun a strategic military base in the north, but the offensive has intensified pressure on troops, military officials said.

The defence ministry in a statement here said one civilian was killed and nine others were wounded when Tigers hit the town of Chavakachcheri in the Jaffna peninsula on Sunday.

The ministry said an additional 21 rebels were killed on Sunday, raising to 267 the number of guerrillas killed since Saturday. Four more government soldiers were also killed Sunday.

The ministry had earlier said eight soldiers were killed and another 101 wounded on Saturday.

Residents in the northern peninsula of Jaffna said the army was easing some of its roadblocks and checkpoints apparently to beef up the defences at the entrance to the peninsula at Elephant Pass.

Elephant Pass is a narrow causeway linking the peninsula with the rest of the country but the fortified defences around it prevented the Tigers taking the area despite three concerted attacks on Saturday, officials said.

The LTTE had warned civilians to move away from the area but international aid agencies said they were concerned for the safety of the local population increasingly getting caught up in the cross-fire.

Military officials said the guerrillas were mounting attacks ahead of the December 21 polls in which President Chandrika Kumaratunga is seeking re-election.

Thousands of residents still trapped in Grozny

MOSCOW, Dec 13: Tens of thousands of desperate civilians remained holed up in the besieged Chechen capital Grozny today after a mere trickle escaped during a brief weekend lull in Russia's blitz of the rebel city, reports AFP.

As Russia renewed its bombardment of Grozny, rights groups said many of the estimated 40,000 residents were too frightened to leave the relative safety of their underground shelters to take up Russian offers of safe passage.

Federal artillery blasted the southern outskirts of Grozny early Monday. Chechen military sources in Shali, 20 km southeast of the capital, told AFP.

The strikes resumed close to midnight, signalling an end to a

unilateral Russian ceasefire declared to encourage residents of the Chechen capital to leave the city.

Moscow promised Saturday there would be a ceasefire lasting several hours each day to let civilians get out using two special evacuation corridors.

But just 700 to 800 residents had managed to escape over the weekend, state-owned ORT television reported, while NTV private television station said 300 had fled through the northern corridor Sunday and 150 via the south.

Reports said that refugees fleeing the breakaway republic's capital city in recent days had said they were attacked by Russian helicopters and artillery.

A spokeswoman for Human

Rights Watch told CNN: "We spoke to many people whose family members and friends in the buses and trucks they rode in were hit by fire from Russian artillery bombardment. Russian planes and helicopter gunships on the roads as they were leaving."

Vehicles with women and children have been fired upon by Russian forces. It's understandable that people are afraid to flee even given the dire conditions that they are facing in their homes," spokeswoman Cassandra Cavanaugh said Sunday from the rights group's New York headquarters.

Grozny's mayor Lecha Dudayev, called for international observers to monitor the evacuation, saying that without international guarantees Grozny

residents would not dare to use the "safety corridors offered by Moscow," Dudayev told a French support group.

With Grozny completely encircled by Russian forces for the past week, food is reported to be running out while no medicines are available for the sick, elderly and wounded stranded in a city without heating or water.

Sunday, Moscow tightened its grip on the rebel capital by seizing the Khankala military aerodrome on the eastern outskirts of Grozny.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and National Security Adviser Samuel Berger both said late Sunday they believed Moscow was beginning to change its approach as a result of international pressure.



Indonesian Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri (R) addresses Muslims and Christians leaders in the capital city of the troubled province of Maluku, Ambon, on Sunday as Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid (L) looks on. Wahid and Megawati visited the strife-torn city of Ambon to urge Muslims and Christians to settle their differences before the government be "forced to intervene". — AFP photo

Megawati's party opposes federal Indonesia

JAKARTA, Dec 13: Indonesia's largest political party is opposing calls by new President Abdurrahman Wahid to adopt a federal system as a way of easing separatist tensions, a news report said today, reports AP.

The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, led by Wahid's Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri, said it rejected federalism as a means of uniting the world's fourth most populous nation.

"We cannot tolerate a federal state," The Jakarta Post quoted Dimiyati Hartono, the party's deputy chairman, as saying.

Dimiyati said federalism ran counter to the constitution.

The party, which promotes nationalism, controls 153 seats in the 500-member parliament. Megawati has not commented on the issue.

Indonesia's constitution describes the sprawling nation of more than 13,000 islands as a "unitary state" in which the central government in Jakarta

holds most of the power. But, with more than 300 ethnic groups, there have been repeated calls for Jakarta to loosen its grip on power and give more responsibility and revenue to its 26 provinces.

Indonesia briefly flirted with federalism after its old colonial master recognised its independence in 1949. But founding President Sukarno, Megawati's father, soon abolished it so that Jakarta more or less directly ruled the provinces.

Authoritarian leader, Suharto, who replaced Sukarno amid political turmoil in 1968, strengthened the central government's control and ruthlessly used the military to crush dissent and separatism.

During Suharto's 32-year reign, which ended last year, the reintroduction of a federal system was a taboo subject due to fears it could lead to the disintegration of the far-flung archipelago.

In many parts of Indonesia, separatist movements threaten

to break apart the country. One of the main complaints is unfair power and revenue sharing.

Two weeks ago, Wahid told military leaders at the National Defence Institute in Jakarta that he supported federalism.

"I agree... Indonesia should have a federal state system," Wahid said. "But what is most important for us is the implementation of the system, not the name of it."

Wahid, who came to power on October 20, has said repeatedly he will maintain the Indonesia's national unity following the breaking away of East Timor after an August 30, independence referendum.

Violent separatism continues to flare, particularly in north-western Aceh province and in Irian Jaya, which covers the western half of New Guinea island.

Both are rich in natural resources, such as minerals and oil. And both complain that Jakarta has long bled them of revenue.

Ferry disaster claims 11 in Tanzania

NAIROBI, Dec 13: At least 11 people died and 32 others are missing after a ferry boat sank on Lake Victoria in north-western Tanzania on Friday, Radio Tanzania, monitored here, reported today, reports AFP.

The radio report said 102 other people were rescued from the boat, which hit a rock and broke apart on Lake Victoria. It was believed to have been carrying 145 passengers, as well as a consignment of fish and clothes.

The accident occurred between the Muleba islands and Nyanamirembe coastal town in Biharamulo district.

Local residents and government maritime officials are still searching for bodies in the lake, it said.

EU parliament opens today

STRASBOURG, Dec 13: The new European parliament, which will be inaugurated Tuesday by French President Jacques Chirac, is set to bring further fame and fortune to the capital of France's Alsace region, reports AFP.

The parliament itself is expected to bolster the local economy to the tune of 73 million dollars (euros) a year, based on a revised 1994 study.

And once a month -- when the parliament is in session -- it will become a city within a city.

In addition to the 626 parliament members and their assistants, Strasbourg -- which sits on the River Ill near its junction with the Rhine -- becomes home to at least 1,500 secretaries, receptionists, translators, security and service staff needed to grease the wheels of the expanding EU machinery.

The city's hoteliers are rubbing their hands together with anticipation. During parliamentary sessions, hotels boast 95 percent occupancy rates, with those in search of accommodation having to travel up to 30 km to find a room.

Over the year as a whole occupancy rates in Strasbourg are the envy of hoteliers in the rest of France at around 65 per cent.

With 110 hotels -- including six four-star locations -- offering 6,500 rooms, the city is well equipped to cope with the influx of eurocrats and their entourages.

Emergency in Sudan

KHARTOUM, Dec 13: Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir declared a state of emergency from today and dissolved parliament following a mounting power struggle with parliament speaker Hassan al-Turabi, reports AFP.

In a speech on state television late Sunday, General Beshir said he could no longer tolerate rival power bases here after a months-long rift with his former ally who is also secretary general of the ruling National Congress.

Beshir, who was wearing traditional Sudanese robes, "declared a state of emergency for a period of three months starting Monday" to help the country "face external plots" and stand firm on the home front.

Appearing composed, he said the decision had been taken because of the "duplication of state institutions" and he called on Sudanese to elect a new parliament without setting a date for elections.

Under Turabi's leadership, parliament had moved to amend the constitution to provide for a prime minister accountable to MPs and direct gubernatorial elections in a move widely seen as an attempt to curb Beshir's powers.

A crucial parliamentary debate on the issue had been scheduled for Tuesday.

The head of state also announced the suspension of four clauses of the constitution which focus on procedures for nominating governors to federal states.

He said that the governors currently in place will continue to assume their duties.

The situation seemed normal overnight Sunday, with police on the main roads proceeding with the usual checks amid a *de facto* night-time curfew that has been in place since Beshir took power in a 1989 bloodless coup.

Things are calm in the streets and there are no troop

movements in the capital." Ghazi Soliman, head of the opposition Democratic Forces Front, told AFP. "Beshir appears to have the situation in the country in hand."

Soliman, who is also a lawyer, said Beshir's move appears to have won without strong-arm measures being necessary against Turabi, who "seems free to move around as he wants."

"With the army holding real power in Sudan," Beshir appears to have won decisively in the conflict with Turabi and his followers in the ruling National Congress party, Ghazi said.

Last month the president cancelled a visit to South Africa after a four-hour meeting with Turabi failed to persuade his rival to give ground on the amendments.

As well as installing a prime minister, Turabi has also pressed for the authorisation of political parties ahead of next March's elections.

Japan passes new N-safety laws

TOKYO, Dec 13: Japan's parliament passed a set of bills on Monday aimed at strengthening nuclear safety measures following criticisms of the government for a slow response to the country's worst-ever nuclear accident in September, reports Reuters.

The Upper House of parliament unanimously passed the legislation aimed at giving the central government a more responsible role during nuclear accidents. The more powerful Lower House passed the bills last month.

The government has come under fire for lax supervision and a slow response to the accident at a uranium processing plant in Tokaimura which exposed about 70 people to radiation.

Under the new law, the prime minister would declare a state of "nuclear emergency" and immediately set up a crisis management centre to order evacuations and other safety measures during a major nuclear disaster.

Previously, local governments had the primary responsibility of instructing residents on safety measures. They have long demanded the central government play a more active role.

The new legislation requires nuclear facility operators to immediately report any accidents and the prime minister could order the dispatch of Japan's Self-Defence Forces if necessary. The laws also require periodic inspections of nuclear fuel facilities, previously required only for nuclear power plants.

The Tokaimura accident, which occurred when workers ignored proper safety procedures and triggered a nuclear chain reaction, or critically, was ranked fourth of seven on an international scale of nuclear accidents.

Tokaimura mayor Tasuya Murakami had said he welcomed the new bills but what was more important was whether the new legislation would be effective in practice.

US, China to reopen talks on embassy bombing

BEIJING, Dec 13: US State Department legal advisor David Andrews was due here late Monday for several days of talks with Chinese officials over compensation for the mistaken NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia, US officials said, reports AFP.

The talks will also include negotiations on compensation to US diplomatic missions in China damaged in anti-American riots that erupted after the May 7 bombing in Belgrade.

The visit will be the fifth by Andrews since the bombing and the third to focus on property damage to the Chinese embassy and US diplomatic missions.

In early August, the two sides agreed a 4.5 million dollar compensation package for the deaths of three Chinese and injuries to 20 others when five laser guided missiles slammed into the Chinese embassy.

Washington has blamed the bombing on outdated maps, an excuse dismissed as inadequate by Beijing.



The Governor of Macau Rocha Vieira (R) says goodbye to the residents of Taipa Island, Macau, yesterday. Macau returns to Chinese rule on the stroke of midnight on December 19 after four centuries of Portuguese administration. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY



Rightist presidential candidate Joaquin Lavín acknowledges the applause from supporters on Sunday in Santiago after receiving 47.52 per cent of the vote in Chile's presidential elections. Lavín and his leftist rival Ricardo Lagos were less than half a percentage point apart in the poll results with both falling short of the 50 per cent required to avert a run-off. — AFP photo

Philippine quake toll rises to 6: The

death toll from a powerful earthquake that struck the main Philippine island of Luzon rose to six with the number of injured rising to at least 40, disaster relief agencies and newspapers said in Manila Monday, AFP reports from Manila.

Four people ranging in age from 60 to 80, died of heart attacks during the quake, the civil defence office said while a 59-year-old man died of a heart attack on his way to a Manila hospital, newspapers said. An 11-year-old girl was also crushed by a falling wall caused by the quake that hit Luzon before dawn Sunday.

Armed attack on Lagos governor:

An armed gang opened fire on a convoy carrying the governor of Nigeria's economic capital, Lagos, but he escaped after guards shot and killed four assailants, the city's police chief said Monday, AFP reports from Lagos.

Governor Bola Tinubu's convoy was returning to his official residence in the early hours of Sunday morning from an inspection tour when it was blocked and fired on. Lagos Police Commissioner Mike Okoro said. Okoro, confirming press reports, said the governor was unharmed in the attack during which his car was hit by bullets.

Settlers open new Golan housing development

KATZRIN, Golan Heights, Dec 13: Defiant settlers on the Golan Heights inaugurated a new housing estate on the plateau Sunday, stepping up their campaign to keep the region under Israeli control, reports AFP.

Israeli President Ezer Weizman, however, called for restraint from the settlers, saying his nephew was one of them.

The dedication ceremony for the new 320-home district in an area of Katzrin, the main Jewish town on the occupied plateau, was brought forward a month following last week's announcement of a resumption of peace talks between Israel and Syria.

"We will never leave," Katzrin mayor Sammy Bar Lev

said at the ceremony, attended by several hundred residents, many of them children who sang and waved Israeli flags.

"I regret to say that we face a difficult struggle but if we remain united we will win," Bar Lev said, assuring settlers they would not be chased from their homes.

The ceremony was held ahead of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's trip to Washington to re-launch the negotiations Wednesday, with Damascus demanding the return of the Golan as the price for peace.

Ironically, the new housing development has been named Batra, which means "the last" in Aramaic, the language of the Talmud spoken in the Holy Land 2,000 years ago.

Upper caste men hack 4 to death in India

NEW DELHI, Dec 13: Upper caste Hindu men allegedly hacked four "untouchable" brothers to death in northern India after one of them fell in love with a higher caste girl, a report said today, reports AFP.

The killings took place Friday in the Jhadi village of Haryana state, 200 km north-west of Indian capital, the Indian Express newspaper said.

"Nityanand was in love with an upper caste Brahmin girl who the Brahmin villagers killed seven months ago for 'dishonouring' their community, the paper said.

On December 10, Brahmin villagers armed with swords, axes and iron rods allegedly attacked Nityanand and his three brothers, killing them on the spot before dumping the bodies, the daily quoting witnesses said.

One of the attackers is related to a local politician and

the police has promised an "impartial inquiry and stringent action" against the killers, the daily said.

India's untouchables occupy the lowest rung of the entrenched caste system.

A report by Human Rights Watch in April has said more than 160 million lower-caste Hindu "untouchables" in India live in sub-human conditions and face increasing discrimination, violence, rape and murder.

It said "untouchables," commonly known as "Dalits" or "broken" people, suffered from a "hidden apartheid," with caste violence "since the early 1990s ... escalating dramatically in response to the growing Dalit rights movement."

Between 1994 and 1996, a total of 98,349 cases were registered with the police nationwide as crimes and atrocities against Dalits.

4 Falungong members arrested

HONG KONG, Dec 13: Four members of the outlawed Falungong spiritual sect have been arrested for revealing information concerning the case of a group member beaten to death in police custody, a Hong Kong-based rights group said Monday, reports AFP.

Liu Jinling, Li Yanling, Chi Yunling and Chen Shihuan were charged last week by the public security bureau of Zhaozhou city, eastern Shandong Province for "supplying intelligence to foreigners," the information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said.

The four could face up to 10 years imprisonment, the centre said.

The "intelligence" referred to the death in police custody of Falungong practitioner Zhao Jinhua, who was confirmed dead by the Zhangzhenghen precinct in Zhaozhou city on October 7, the centre said.

Falungong practitioners in the city have maintained that Zhao was beaten to death and that marks seen on Zhao's body were proof of the beating.

Police ensured Zhao's body was cremated on October 9, before the family could take pictures of the body, the centre said.

Beatings in Chinese prisons are routine as a method of extracting confessions from alleged criminals.

Nine people were detained in connection with the case in early November, but only four people formally charged, with police travelling to the southern city of Shenzhen to arrest Liu Jinling.

The public security bureau in Zhaozhou city not only refused to investigate those responsible for the beating, but set up a 20-member investigation team to find out who leaked the information to outside the country," the centre said in a faxed statement.

Nepal's PM announces commission on HR

KATHMANDU, Dec 13: Nepalese Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai announced Sunday the government would create a pair of commissions to protect human rights and control administrative corruption, reports AFP.

"I have forwarded my intimation to King Birendra about the formation of the high-level Human Rights Commission," Bhattarai told reporters.

"On his approval of then, the name of the chief of the commission will be revealed to the public," he said.

Bhattarai also said he would form an anti-corruption commission, but added he could not promise to eliminate the practice.

"This anti-corruption commission will be working in close cooperation with the high-power Commission for Abuse of Authority, which is already set up under constitutional provision."

"I cannot fully guarantee about eradicating corruption but I will certainly try to control it," Bhattarai said.

"I myself will not indulge in corruption. I will not allow my ministers to practice corruption either," he said.

Bhattarai renewed his pledge to pardon the country's Maoist guerrillas if they laid down their weapons and agreed to peace talks. If the rebels did not agree, he said, the government would step up its crackdown.

Off the Record

World's biggest bell

NEW PORT, Kentucky: The world's biggest free-swinging bell, a 33-ton bronze casting, is in position for its first public ringing on New Year's Eve, reports AP.

The World Peace Bell will be at the center of a splashy, all-day celebration that will include dances, interfaith celebrations, a peace parade for children, fireworks and partying in nearby restaurants.

It initially will be sounded hourly by a small, hammer-like striker on the outside of the bell starting at 6 am on December 31, as the new year begins at Tonga in the South Pacific.

At midnight local time, the huge bell will sound at full volume as it is swung and struck by its 3-ton internal clapper.

Boy saved from python attack

SYDNEY: A seven-year old boy on a camping holiday with his father awoke in the early hours of Monday to find a three-metre python wrapped around his neck, Australian police said, reports Reuters.

The boy's father wrestled the snake in their tent, managing to untangle its Vice-like grip, but not before the python bit his son several times on the face and neck.

The boy, Ned O'Hare, was flown from the camping site on Moreton Island in Queensland state to a nearby hospital. He was later released.