

Pakistan promises to bring hijackers to book: US

SHEPHERDSTOWN, West Virginia, Jan 4: Pakistan has assured the United States that it will act in compliance with international aviation agreements and arrest the hijackers of an Indian Airlines jet should they be found on its soil, a US official said Monday, reports AFP.

"Pakistan has told us that it will meet its obligations under the international convention to apprehend the hijackers and bring them to justice," State Department spokesman James Rubin told reporters.

His comments came as tension between India and Pakistan mounted over the incident with officials in both capitals accusing each other of promoting terrorism.

The hijacking ended on New Year's Eve in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar with India bowing to the perpetrators demands to release three militants in exchange for the 160 passengers and crew of the Airbus A300.

The hijackers then disappeared and while Islamabad has denied they have entered Pakistan, few analysts doubt they have slipped undetected through remote mountain passes into the country.

Rubin said Washington was not aware of the current location of the hijackers but called for any country having information on their whereabouts to act appropriately.

"We continue to work with countries in the region, we think they must be brought to justice to remind all countries of their international obligations associated with the convention on hijacking," Rubin said.

"We continue to urge in the strongest possible terms that any and all states involved take action to ensure that the hijackers are prosecuted, or extradited the hijackers to a place where they can be apprehended and prosecuted."

The latest accusations appeared designed to divert domestic denunciations for delay, inefficiency and insensitivity of the Indian government to the pain and suffering of hijacked Indian airliner, Foreign Minister Abus Sattar said in Islamabad.

The Indian premier's statement also points to a pre-conceived objective of building a strategic relationship with the United States on trumped-up charges of terrorism against Pakistan," He told the Associated Press of Pakistan.

"In doing so, India no doubt wants world opinion to ignore India's abhorrent record of state terrorism," Sattar said.

He said said Pakistan's conduct in dealing with the hijacked Indian plane was "transparent and was based on international law."

The safety of passengers and crew has been Pakistan's primary concern in dealing with the hijacked plane, Sattar added.

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Lebanese policemen fire at a building near the Russian embassy in Beirut where a sniper was hiding after three grenades were fired at the Russian embassy compound and a nearby police barracks on Monday.

23 killed in Lebanon clashes

Rocket attack on Russian embassy

BEIRUT, Jan 4: Twenty-three people -- civilians, soldiers and Islamic fundamentalists -- died in Lebanon Monday in clashes that pitted Sunni Muslim extremists against Lebanese security forces in Beirut and in the north of the country, reports AFP.

As fighting continued in the north for the fourth day running between the army and the fundamentalists, some of them trained in Afghanistan, a lone militant attacked the Russian embassy in the heart of Beirut.

The suicide attacker, a Palestinian, named by security services as Ahmad Raja Abu Kharub, 30, was finally killed when a special police squad stormed the building under construction from where he had fired rocket-propelled grenades, just 20 metres from the embassy, an official statement said.

One policeman was also killed and seven people were wounded, two seriously, in the

hour-long shootout, police said. No one in the embassy was hurt. State-owned television station Tele-Liban said a statement was found in Kharub's pocket saying he wanted to be a martyr for Grozny, "the capital of Muslim majority Chechnya where Russian forces are engaged in a bloody military campaign."

Police sources told AFP that Kharub was carrying a Palestinian refugee's identity card, saying he had been born in the Nabatiyeh refugee camp in southern Lebanon, which was destroyed by an Israeli air attack in 1972.

Security sources said Kharub -- also known as Abu Obeida -- lived in a part of Lebanon's largest Palestinian refugee camp, Ain el-Helweh, that is the stronghold of the League of Muslims, an outlawed Sunni Muslim militant group led by Abu Mahjan.

A hand grenade was thrown late Monday at a Lebanese army

road block at the main entrance to the Ain el-Helweh camp, police said.

No one was hurt in the incident and it was not known who threw the grenade.

Police said the army had not brought in reinforcements and the situation had returned to normal.

Meanwhile at least 11 Sunni Muslim rebels were killed Monday when the Lebanese army seized the rebel-held village of Kfarhabu in northern Lebanon, witnesses said.

The dead included one of the rebel leaders, Abdullah Hazim, and first aid workers who went to help take out the bodies said rebel losses "could well be heavier."

Security forces said they had already killed about 30 rebels since the operation against them began Friday in the Demnaye plateau 45 km east of the northern city of Tripoli, and its surrounding mountains.

Violent battles in Grozny

KISLYAR, Russia, Jan 4: Violent battles raged throughout Grozny on Tuesday as federal troops pushed into central districts of the Chechen capital and warplanes pounded rebel bases in the mountainous south, the Russian military said, reports AFP.

Waves of ground attack aircraft blasted guerrilla bases in Kharachot and Vedeno, the base of leading Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev.

Russian military officials dismissed Chechen claims to have seized four villages southwest of Grozny, saying the violent clashes there had been a failed Chechen attempt to break out of the besieged capital.

Federal forces meanwhile were gradually moving into downtown areas of the break-away capital despite fierce resistance from Chechen guerrillas, NTV television reported citing military officials in Moscow, headquarters of the Russian operation in Chechnya.

Government forces had launched a fresh bid to take the Staropromyslovsky district of northwestern Grozny and the Staraya Sunzha suburb to the northeast of the Chechen capital, NTV said.

Elite OMON interior ministry soldiers said the Russian flag was flying over some districts of Grozny, the television channel said, although military headquarters in Moscow did not confirm the claim.

Rapist executed in Philippines

MANILA, Jan 4: A man who raped his daughter more than 100 times was put to death by lethal injection in the Philippines on Tuesday in the world's first known state execution of the new millennium, officials said, reports AFP.

Church leaders and human rights groups immediately condemned President Joseph Estrada's government for the execution of Alex Bartolome, accusing it of starting the year "with blood on its hands."

Estrada spared the fate of the 41 year-old unskilled worker when he rejected appeals for a last-minute reprieve.

Prison officials declared Bartolome dead at 3:10 p.m. (13:10 BST), 10 minutes after he received the lethal injection.

The father of six was convicted by a lower court in 1995 of repeatedly raping his 14 year-old daughter over two years.

Bartolome had appealed his conviction, claiming his sexual relations with his daughter were the acts of "two consenting adults." The Supreme Court rejected his plea and affirmed the death sentence.

In its ruling, the Supreme Court said Bartolome's argument "could only be concocted by a morally corrupt and mentally depraved sex maniac" and added he "deserves to forfeit his place in human society."

Bartolome was the first prisoner to be executed in the Philippines this year and the seventh since 1999, when the government re-introduced capital punishment after a 23-year lull.

Moon illusion

WASHINGTON, Jan 4: The illusion that the full moon seen near the horizon is bigger than the moon seen overhead is a trick the brain plays when it perceives distance to a far object, according to new research by a father-son team, reports AP.

In a study appearing Tuesday in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Lloyd Kaufman and his son, James Kaufman, report that a test with artificial, identically sized moons showed that viewers of a horizon moon perceived it as being farther away.

The researchers said that when the moon is on the horizon, the brain apparently picks up distance cues from the surrounding terrain and interprets the moon as being more distant. This, in turn, causes the brain to perceive the moon as larger, the researchers said.

When the moon is overhead in an empty sky, there are no distance cues and the moon is perceived as being closer and smaller, the researchers said.

Kumaratunga accuses LTTE rebels as failed assassins

COLOMBO, Jan 4: Sri Lanka's president, her right eye closed from an assassination attempt last month, has appeared on television to publicly accuse the Tamil Tiger rebels for the first time for trying to kill, then discredit her, reports AP.

Kumaratunga, 54, suffered a serious eye injury in a suicide bombing Dec 21 that killed 23 people just two days before presidential elections. Doctors have said she may lose the sight in the injured eye.

"After they failed to kill me on Dec 21, they went village to village with helters telling people I have suffered brain damage," she said in a televised address to the nation on Monday.

With one eye shut, Mrs. Kumaratunga looked assertive on the broadcast. Wearing spectacles, she often thumped her desk to emphasize a point.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam "wanted to kill me but it was God who saved me," the president said.

This is the first time the Sri Lankan government has publicly blamed the Tamil rebels for the assassination attempt. A three-member team of investigators is seeking to establish who was behind the blast and how a suicide bomber managed to get close to Mrs. Kumaratunga.

The rebels are fighting for an independent homeland for Sri Lanka's 3.2 million minority Tamils, saying they can only prosper away from the domination of Sinhalese majority who make up 14 million of the country's 18.6 million people.

Kumaratunga also accused

her top rival, Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party, of joining hands with the Tamil rebels to defeat her in the elections.

"We have proof that the LTTE campaigned for the UNP," Mrs. Kumaratunga said. "LTTE cadres went from village to village telling people that they should vote for UNP. They also told people that if they are found to be voting for her, they may get killed," she said.

Reuter adds: US technical experts arrive in Sri Lanka this week to help investigate a suicide bomb blast which wounded President Chandrika Kumaratunga, government officials said yesterday.

The United States has helped in the past after previous bomb blasts, said an official who declined to be identified.

He said the US team would help local experts investigate the blast at Kumaratunga's election rally as well as a separate blast at main opposition United National Party meeting in a Colombo suburb.

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The chapter then sent a petition with 13,000 names to Jiang, questioning his plans to outlaw the spiritual movement.

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wrongdoings by Falungong members for use in a crackdown on the group, the information centre said.

At that time, the government had not given any hints to the public that it planned to ban the group.

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