

Freed Pak cleric claims hijackers are Indians

KARACHI, Jan 6: A Pakistani cleric, freed by India in a swap for hostages on a seized Indian Airlines jet, claimed today that the five hijackers were Indians, reports AFP.

Maulana Masood Azhar, bearded and wearing spectacles, faced journalists at a news conference for the first time since he was released from jail in Indian-controlled Kashmir last week.

"I kept on asking them who they were. They told me to pray for them and they said they are Indian citizens," Azhar told reporters at the news conference, held in an apartment block near an Islamic seminary in Karachi.

"I pay tribute to the hijackers," he said. "They said they were Indian citizens and they will go back to their country. They were masked and asked me who I was and then hugged me with eyes filled with tears."

Azhar was one of three Kashmiri militants released by India last week after New Delhi gave in to the demands of the five hijackers who held 160 people hostage on the aircraft for eight days.

A second militant, Mushtaq Ahmad Zargar, returned to Pakistan-administered Kashmir late Tuesday, where he was given a rousing welcome by militant groups.

They apologised for not taking off their masks and just kept on talking about jihad

(holy war), Azhar said. "I only know they were Indian citizens but do not know whether they are from Kashmir or somewhere else."

After releasing the hostages at Kandahar airport, in southern Afghanistan, the hijackers sped off with the three militants towards the Pakistani border, Azhar said.

But after just 25 minutes they split up and the three freed militants met with friends who were waiting, he said. The hijackers drove off.

The Pakistan border is around three hours drive from Kandahar and military analysts here said the hijackers likely slipped into Pakistan unnoticed.

"We travelled for around 20-25 minutes together. I felt happy to be with them. Then I was taken on one side as lots of friends were already waiting there, and the hijackers went off," Azhar said.

"I crossed the Pakistani border and did not delay it as it is my own land." He had not been debriefed by Pakistani intelligence, he said.

India and Pakistan have since traded accusations over who was responsible for the hijacking.

The disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir has already sparked two wars between the two countries since they won independence from the British in 1947.

Azhar demanded India release all prisoners held in Kashmir and immediately withdraw its forces from Kashmir and hold negotiations with Pakistan to solve the issue which has engulfed the whole world.



Religious students watch the van carrying Pakistani Scholar Maulana Masood Azhar, freed in a deal in the Indian plane hijack last week. He was being escorted back after a press conference in Karachi yesterday. Azhar, arrested in Indian-held Kashmir in 1994 was one of the three Kashmiri militants freed after the Indian Government bowed to the demands of hijackers in return for 160 hostages in Kandhar, Afghanistan. —AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Landslide kills 4 in Malaysia: Heavy rains in eastern Malaysia flooded several farming villages and triggered a landslide that killed at least four people on Thursday, police said, AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

DPRK-US talks resume Jan 20: North Korea and the United States are to resume talks on improving relations in Berlin around January 20, Japan's Kyodo News agency said yesterday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Japan's nat'l police chief quits: The head of Japan's national police force on Thursday announced his intention to resign amid a series of scandals, a spokesman said, AP reports from Tokyo.

National Police Agency chief Yuko Sekiguchi, 60, told a press conference that he will step down to restore public trust in Japanese law enforcement, an agency spokesman said on customary condition of anonymity. The relatively clean image of Japan's police was rocked last year after senior officials in the Kanagawa prefectural (state) police were accused of covering up drug abuse by an officer. Officers in Kanagawa, near Tokyo, were also allegedly involved in sexual harassment and bullying of colleagues. The prefectural police chief and several other officials have been arrested in the drug cover-up.

First millennium baby undergoes heart surgery

AUCKLAND, Jan 6: The world's first millennium baby underwent heart surgery here today, New Zealand medical authorities said, but exact details of the boy's condition were kept confidential, reports AFP.

The boy, with the first names of Tuatahi Manaaki-tunga, Maori for "the first blessing", was born at 12.01 am on January 1 at Waitakere Hospital, in Auckland's western suburbs.

Tuatahi was transferred to the paediatric cardiac unit at Green Lane Hospital in the city soon afterwards when he developed problems.

Saunders said the child's names were influenced by the birth at the beginning of the millennium and by the boy being the first son after three girls.

The boy's surname and the identity of his parents have not been released.

Israel won't oppose US military aid to Syria

SHEPHERDSTOWN, West Virginia, Jan 6: Israel would not oppose US military aid to Syria as part of a peace deal with Damascus as long as its own defence needs were met by the United States, an Israeli official at peace talks here said Wednesday, reports AFP.

"It is better for Syria to get the aid from the US than from other countries," he said, asking not to be named. "We hope that US aid will influence future Syrian conduct."

The official was confirming a report that appeared earlier in the day in the Haaretz newspaper in Tel Aviv.

Syria's dependence on US assistance is preferable to Russian or European assistance," added an aide to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

The Israeli official who requested anonymity stressed that his government's acceptance of US military aid to Syria depended on Washington's agreement to meet certain Israeli requests in a security package estimated at 17 billion dollars.

The total sum for US compensation for an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights,

Cold wave claims 241 in India

NEW DELHI, Jan 6: A biting cold wave sweeping parts of India has claimed 241 lives and paralysed road, rail and air traffic across many cities, newspapers and domestic news agencies said today, reports AFP.

The maximum number of 154 deaths has occurred in the eastern state of Bihar, followed by neighbouring Uttar Pradesh with 86 deaths, the United News of India (UNI) said.

Rajasthan state, in the north-west and bordering Pakistan, has recorded one death. Chilly winds have been sweeping most of northern India and elsewhere since New Year's eve. The weather office says the spell is likely to continue in the coming days.

The winter has been accompanied by a dense fog which has seriously disrupted life in New Delhi and other areas, causing havoc with train and air traffic.

Several domestic and international flights to New Delhi have been diverted to Bombay.

The fog has also resulted in dozens of road accidents in New Delhi. Last week, one man was killed and some 20 others were injured when they were hit by a train while crossing a rail track in foggy conditions.

Authorities in Uttar Pradesh have closed down all schools for a week.

Newspapers said the cold wave had spread to parts of western and central India as well as the far-east. Officials said the coldest places in India were Kashmir and Rajasthan states.

Suicide bomb attack in Lanka: 160 Tamils held

COLOMBO, Jan 6: Police raided small hotels early Thursday in the Sri Lankan capital and detained 160 Tamils for questioning regarding a suicide bomber attack outside the prime minister's office that killed 13 people, police and witnesses said, reports AP.

Those detained were visiting Colombo, the capital, from other parts of the island nation. Police began questioning them for possible involvement in Wednesday's attack.

Also Thursday, the government urged Parliament to extend emergency rule, accusing Tamil Tiger rebels of trying to destabilise the small island nation.

"The government cannot take any chances and steps have to be taken in the national interest by extending the emergency rule," said Defence Minister General Anuruddha Ratwatte, who is coordinating the government's war efforts against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Ratwatte tabled a motion in Parliament a day after a Tamil rebel suicide bomber blew himself up outside the prime minister's office in a third major guerrilla attack in the past 18

Clintons arrive in new home

CHAPPAQUA, New York, Jan 6: First Lady Hillary Clinton arrived here Wednesday, accompanied by President Bill Clinton, to set up house in this posh New York City suburb and launch her own political career, reports AP.

Some 30 residents lined up the road to greet the first couple as the presidential motorcade rode into town from the Westchester County airport around 6:30 pm (0530 BST).

The Clintons, accompanied by the first lady's mother, walked into the splendid white colonial-style home, nestled among trees, as agents of the first family's Secret Service security detail sealed off the area.

The first couple purchased the house for 1.7 million dollars on November 1.

White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said the Clintons would have dinner with friends in the evening and were to return to Washington early Thursday.

Following weeks of campaign-like appearances and public speculation, the first lady registered as a candidate for the US Senate in New York's Westchester County on December 23.

Hillary Clinton -- the first presidential spouse in US history to run for political office and the first to live officially in a separate residence -- must establish residency in New York by election day in order to be eligible.

Malaysia's ruling party may expel 69 for backing opposition

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 6: Disciplinary chiefs in Malaysia's ruling party have called for the sacking of 69 members who backed the opposition in November polls -- mostly from one rogue division -- and one loyalist said Thursday that hundreds more may face action, reports AFP.

The disciplinary committee of the United Malays National Organisation on Wednesday night recommended that UMNO's Supreme Council sack the 69.

Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who chaired the committee, said it would recommend that two of them be expelled from the party for life.

One stood for the opposition National Justice Party in state assembly elections in Perak and another contested a state seat in Terengganu for the opposition Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS).

Abdullah was quoted by the official news agency Bernama as saying that the other 67 members were found to have betrayed the party in the parliamentary and state elections.

Three were from the north-eastern state of Terengganu -- two had left to join PAS and one had campaigned for the same party.

The remaining 64 members were all from the UMNO division in Sepang south of the capital.

Ramli Karim, strategic officer with the Sepang division, told AFP another 100 members there had also collaborated with the opposition.

"Most of them are teachers and they aided the opposition machinery during the election. We will forward their names to party headquarters next week," he said.

Karim said they were motivated by personal differences with the local leadership or a belief that Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad should step down after almost 19 years at the helm.

Battle over Cuban boy rages despite INS ruling

MIAMI, Jan 6: A US ruling Wednesday that Elian Gonzalez should be reunited with his father has failed to end the international tug-of-war over whether the six-year-old survivor of a failed attempt to reach US shores should be repatriated to Cuba, reports AFP.

A lawyer for the boy's family in the United States announced that he is asking US Attorney General Janet Reno to revoke the INS decision, which touched off a firestorm of protest from Republicans and opponents of Cuban President Fidel Castro.

"It was an unconstitutional and unfair decision, that was reached mainly on the basis of secret meetings with Elian's father and not in accordance with due process of law," said Spencer Eig, an attorney for Elian's relatives in Miami.

Elian was found by fishermen on November 25 clinging to a inner tube, after the boat he was traveling in to reach US shores capsized. His mother and stepfather drowned in the incident.

He has been staying with his Miami relatives and they have sought to keep him in the United States, which has sparked a tug-of-war between the two countries.

Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) officials ruled Wednesday that the boy should be reunited with his Cuban father by January 14. But details as to how, when and where the boy will meet his father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, are still up in the air.

INS commissioner Doris Meissner said the father could travel to Miami to collect the boy, or his Miami relatives could accompany Elian back to Cuba.

Republican Senator Jesse Helms called the INS decision "unwise" and said he intended to introduce a bill that would grant Elian citizenship.

That way, when he is old enough to make decisions for himself, he will be able to claim the freedom his mother purchased for him with her life," Helms said.

The Republican National Committee accused the Clinton administration of caving in to Castro by deciding the case without a court hearing and Eig said he intends to file a court challenge to the INS decision.

More and more top-ranking victims have been claimed by Black Tigers over the years despite efforts to step up security around senior political figures and key installations.

The squads claimed their most prominent victim when former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi was killed in May 1991. Two years later, the then Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa was killed by a suicide bomber in Colombo.

In October 1994, Kumaratunga's main rival for president, Gamini Disanayake, was killed at a public rally by a suspected female Black Tiger.

Ironically, the Tiger assassination squads have often targeted leaders who proposed or tried to open talks with the LTTE. Kumaratunga held talks with the LTTE in 1994.

After surviving the assassination bid last month, Kumaratunga declared she was the only leader who had lived to tell the tale after a suicide attack. She said she tested Tiger leader Velupilliprabhakaran, but was willing

to talk with him to bring peace to the island.

Last July, the LTTE announced it had lost 147 suicide cadres up to the 12th Black Tiger anniversary.

Military commanders say most of the major attacks against army bases in the island's northeast are led by waves of suicide cadres. The Black Tigers sea-going unit known as "Black Sea Tigers" have also inflicted heavy losses on the Sri Lankan navy.

Suicide is venerated within the LTTE, and members of the Black Tigers see it as a privilege to be chosen for missions.

Ordinary rebels are also encouraged by their leaders to commit suicide by chewing cyanide capsules worn around their necks rather than be captured.

Guerrillas have told visiting journalists they must draw lots to decide who is lucky enough one to join the suicide squad, a terrible image for authorities in Colombo who concede that a committed suicide bomber is one of the hardest threats to defend against.

'Black Tigers' keep suicide bomb fears alive in Lanka

COLOMBO, Jan 6: For Sri Lanka's Tiger rebels suicide is a way of life, and their preferred weapon is the suicide bomber. When the third human bomb in as many weeks exploded Wednesday, Colombo was alert to the danger, reports AFP.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) regard their elite Black Tiger suicide squad as a protective armour in their fight for a separate state called Eelam in the island's northeast.

Authorities were searching for 10 suicide bombers when a woman Black Tiger detonated explosives strapped to her body while she was being searched by a woman constable outside the prime minister's office on Wednesday.

The Black Tiger who perished also killed 12 others, but may have missed her intended target -- possibly the motorcade of a senior government minister.

"We have averted a bigger disaster," a police spokesman declared.

The alert guards questioned her because of her suspicious behaviour. If not for the security staff, she would have hit her target.

The suicide bombers usually strike with deadly accuracy, although President Chandrika Kumaratunga survived an attack at a political rally on December 18 in which 26 were killed.

84 Russian troops killed in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Jan 6: Eighty-four Russian soldiers were killed in Chechnya in the past 10 days and more than 180 others wounded in heavy fighting for control of the republic's capital, Grozny, Interfax news agency said today, reports AFP.

The losses included 78 regular army soldiers and six special interior ministry troops who died in the past day alone, the agency said, quoting Russian defence sources.

A special Illyushin-76 transport plane was dispatched to Mozdok, headquarters of the Russian military command in the north Caucasus, to evacuate the wounded to Moscow, the report said.

The defence sources quoted by Interfax attributed the recent surge in casualties to intense fighting taking place in and around Grozny, capital of the rebel republic and the symbolic prize of the conflict.

Russian officials said Wednesday that a total of 475 soldiers had been killed and nearly 1,350 wounded since the offensive in Chechnya was launched more than four months ago.

It was not clear if any of the latest casualties had been included in that toll or are in addition to it.

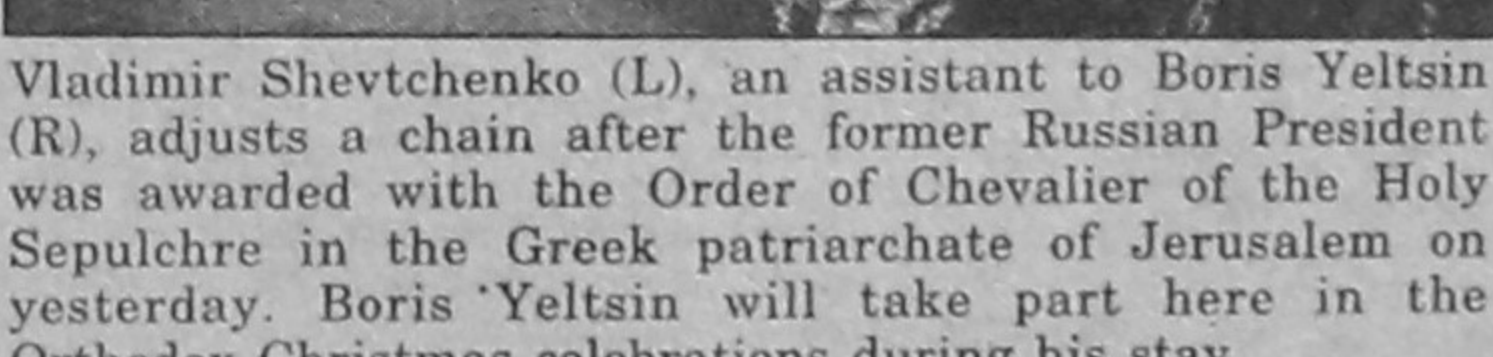
Securitymen kill four militants in Gauhati

GAUHATI, Jan 6: Securitymen killed four militants three of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and one of Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) -- during separate encounters in Assam since Tuesday, official sources said here today, reports PTI.

Army troops operating in Nalbari district today killed a hardcore BLT militant and recovered from his possession a .315 rifle along with several rounds of ammunition. Another BLT militant Ranjit Bodo was caught during the encounter.

In another encounter, patrolling army troops killed two hardcore ULFA militants and seriously injured another in Tinsukia yesterday.

The slain militants were identified as Ananda Das alias Udipta Bhorali, chief of the publicity wing of the outfit's Didingh Unit, and Sumiron Moran Alias Umtra Baruah. Publicity Secretary of its Lakhang Daisa Unit,



Vladimir Shevtchenko (L), an assistant to Boris Yeltsin (R), adjusts a chain after the former Russian President was awarded with the Order of Chevalier of the Holy Sepulchre in the Greek patriarchate of Jerusalem on yesterday. Boris Yeltsin will take part here in the Orthodox Christmas celebrations during his stay. —AFP photo

Yeltsin in Jerusalem

JERUSALEM, Jan 6: Former Russian president Boris Yeltsin, on a historic pilgrimage to the Holy Land, said today he believed the Russian flag would be flying over Chechnya in two months, as fighting raged on in the rebel republic, reports AFP.

Asked during a visit to Jerusalem's Old City how long the conflict would last, Yeltsin said: "It will last two months and then we will put our flag on Chechnya. This is the choice of the Chechen people and then there will be peace."

There will be a member of the (Russian) federation which will be at peace and a Chechen republic without bandits," he told journalists in Russian.

The Chechens themselves want to clean up Grozny with their own hands.

At least 500 Russian troops have died and well over 1,000 wounded since the launch of the ground invasion of Chechnya on October 1, according to figures from Moscow.

But Yeltsin, travelling as "first president" of Russia despite his shock resignation New Year's Eve, said: "There will be no losses among civilians."

Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov on Wednesday proposed a three-day ceasefire Wednesday but it was dismissed