

International

10 killed in plane crash near Zurich

ZURICH, Switzerland, Jan 11: A passenger plane carrying 10 people crashed near Zurich airport just after take-off late Monday, killing all aboard, the head of SAIRGroup, the company which owned the doomed plane, said, reports AFP.

Seven passengers and three crew were on the Saab 340 Cityliner twin-engine aircraft run by Swiss airline Crossair when it smashed into the ground, SAIRGroup president Philippe Bruggisser said.

He added that the cause of the accident had not yet been established.

The aircraft, built in 1991, disappeared from radar screens just before 6:00 p.m. (2300 BST) and crashed several minutes later near the town of Niederhasli, northwest of Zurich, according to Crossair spokesman Herwin Schaerer.

It had been heading to Dresden in eastern Germany.

One witness, Heinz Brandli, told the ATS news agency that the plane had suddenly been engulfed in a "huge fireball" while in the air. It then fell to earth ablaze, sliding some 400 metres (yards), he said.

Debris was scattered 500 metres around the point of impact, which was sealed off. Local police said five-metre flames were still leaping over the wreckage.

Appeal for calm as N Ireland security man gunned down

BELFAST, Jan 11: Authorities in Northern Ireland appealed for calm Tuesday after the murder of a Protestant paramilitary sparked fears of a wave of revenge attacks.

Richard Jameson, 46, was gunned down outside his home near Portadown in County Armagh late Monday. He had links with the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a Protestant paramilitary group which supports British rule of the province, reports AFP.

Members of the rival Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), a small maverick organisation allegedly involved in illegal drug dealing, were blamed for the attack.

Officially, both organisations are on ceasefire as part of the Northern Ireland peace process, but police fear the killing could signal the start of a bloody feud.

Members of the LVF and UVF clashed two weeks ago and 12 men were given hospital treatment after fighting broke out at a social club in Portadown.

Policitors from all sides called for calm.

David Ervine, of the Progressive Unionist Party -- the UVF's political wing -- said he was disgusted by the killing.

A disparate group, masquerading as loyalists giving cloud cover to the notorious trade of drug dealing, was responsible, he said.

Uzbek President Karimov reelected

TASHKENT, Jan 11: Uzbek President Islam Karimov was swept back into office in a nearly unanimous victory marred by his opponent's indirect admission that he only ran to make the vote look fair, reports AFP.

Karimov, a former Communist boss who for the last decade ran this isolated and poor Muslim state with an iron fist, was awarded a new five-year term Monday with 91.90 per cent of the vote on 95.10 per cent turnout.

His unheralded challenger Abdulhaziz Dzhalalov, a Marxist philosophy professor, took 4.17 per cent in a poll boycotted by the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Dzhalalov grabbed the election headlines after conceding that he only entered the race to make it look democratic and had even himself voted for Karimov in the poll.

"I voted for stability, peace, our nation's independence, for the development of Uzbekistan," Dzhalalov said after casting his ballot Sunday.

"So as paradoxical as it may sound, I voted for Islam Karimov," the candidate said, adding: "I ran so that democracy would win."

China warns India against giving asylum to Tibetan spiritual leader

BEIJING, Jan 11: China today warned New Delhi against granting asylum to the Tibetan spiritual leader who escaped to India last week and said it would oppose "hostile overseas forces" using religion to foment unrest in China, reports AFP.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao indicated that political asylum granted to the Karmapa Rinpoche would violate an agreement between New Delhi and Beijing of non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

"China and India have stated in explicit terms that they will develop and improve bilateral relations and on relevant issues the Indian side has made commitments," Zhu said at a routine briefing.

"The Indian side has said in explicit terms that it recognises Tibet as an inalienable part of Chinese territory and that the Dalai Lama cannot engage in political activities in India."

"I think the Indian side is well aware of this," Zhu said.

The 17th Karmapa, one of Tibetan Buddhism's most revered spiritual reincarnations, arrived in Dharamsala, India last week after an arduous week-long trek over the Himalayas.

Tibet. We oppose any infiltration by any religious extremist and we are also opposed to any interference in China's internal affairs by any religious forces outside China," Zhu said.

Chinese State Councillor Ismail Amat Monday also alleged that there were attempts by hostile elements to split China, further underscoring the religious strife amongst Chinese minorities.

"China will adhere to the reform and opening up policy while firmly resisting hostile overseas forces that use religion to infiltrate into China," Amat told a conference of Chinese religious leaders.

"We will strengthen the management of religious affairs while respecting the religious beliefs of ethnic minorities and will firmly prevent and oppose hostile foreign forces from using religious issues to engage in ethnic splitting activities," he said, according to the official press.

Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji addressed the religious conference Tuesday and urged religious leaders to rally China's diverse religious groups around the leadership of the atheist Communist Party, Xinhua said.



The 17th Karmapa Rinpoche poses for a picture at an undisclosed location, near Dharamsala, India, on Monday. The fourteen-year-old, considered the most senior spiritual leaders in Tibetan Buddhism, arrived in India on January 5 after a harrowing escape from China. According to exiled Tibetan officials in Dharamsala, the 17th Karmapa Rinpoche is destined to become a senior leader of the entire Tibetan movement. —AFP photo

Bosnian Serb army chief to face genocide charge

THE HAGUE, Netherlands, Jan 11: UN prosecutors consider it one of the bloodiest "ethnic cleansing" campaigns of the Bosnian war -- a terror offensive that drove 100,000 people from their homes and left a trail of hundreds of dead bodies, reports AP.

On Tuesday, a Bosnian Serb commander and his political ally accused of masterminding the bloody purge were to be charged before the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal with genocide and crimes against humanity in the court's latest push to win its first genocide conviction.

The case against Gen Momir Talic and Radoslav Brdjanin is pivotal for prosecutors at the tribunal, who have failed to make genocide charges stick in the seven years since the UN court was established to bring justice to the Balkans.

Putin shuffles top cabinet posts

MOSCOW, Jan 11: Acting president Vladimir Putin reshuffled top officials Monday, promoting Russia's top debt negotiator to number two in his cabinet and sacking a scandal-tainted senior Kremlin aide, reports AFP.

Finance Minister Mikhail Kasyanov became first deputy prime minister while keeping the finance portfolio and his role as Russia's pointman on drawn-out negotiations to reschedule its 140 billion dollar foreign debt.

Loyalist Emergencies Minister Sergei Shoigu crept up the cabinet hierarchy, becoming a deputy prime minister as a reward for the key role he played in December 19 legislative elections.

Shoigu, who also keeps his ministry, considerably enhanced Putin's political prospects by leading the pro-Kremlin Unity bloc from nowhere to take second place in the elections to the State Duma lower house of parliament.

No breakthrough in Syria-Israel talks

SHEPHERDSTOWN, West Virginia, Jan 11: Peace talks between Israel and Syria resumed without agreement on new borders or any other major elements of a land-for-peace treaty despite rigorous American mediation, reports AP.

As the two delegations packed to go home Monday, State Department spokesman James P Rubin said they would resume negotiations on January 19, probably in the Washington area. "We are on the right track," he said. He gave no indication how the gaps might be closed quickly.

The basic shape of a treaty has been clear since Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak took office last July. Israel would surrender virtually all the Golan Heights, a strategic

Easing Indo-Pak tension Clinton's prime concern

WASHINGTON, Jan 11: US President Bill Clinton has declared that easing of tensions between India and Pakistan and fighting weapons proliferation and terrorism will top his agenda this year, his last in office, reports IPI.

Easing tensions between India and Pakistan and fighting weapons proliferation, terrorism and the nexus between them are the main goals during this last year of his tenure, Clinton said, in his annual national strategy report to Congress.

Outlining his heavy national security agenda to change the world, Clinton said his other goals include working to change the regime in Iraq, restraining the North Korean and Iranian Missile programmes and forging a lasting peace in the Middle East.

Securing peace in the Balkans, Northern Ireland, helping Russia strengthen its economy and fight corruption as it heads towards its first democratic transfer of power and furthering arms control through discussions with Russia on the anti-ballistic missile treaty and deeper reductions in strategic nuclear weapons are also among his agenda.

Clinton will also strive towards implementing China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and other global institutions while promoting freedom and human rights there.

Clinton claimed that US had done much over the past seven years during his tenure to build a better world which included negotiating the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (though it was rejected by the US Senate).

Our military, Clinton said, is -- and will continue to be -- capable of carrying out our national strategy by meeting America's defense commitments around the world.

He noted that his defense budget has significantly increased funding for readiness and modernisation of the armed forces.

He also proposed a 112 billion-dollar increase across fiscal years 2000 to 2005 -- the first long-term sustained increase in defense spending in over a decade.

Separatist flag hoisted in Irian Jaya

JAKARTA, Jan 11: Thousands of people attended a ceremony to hoist the separatist Free West Papua flag in a town in Indonesia's easternmost province of Irian Jaya, a report said here Tuesday, reports AFP.

The flag raising ceremony was held at a coordination post of pro-independence supporters in Sorong in southwestern Irian Jaya on Monday, the Suara Karya daily said.

No clashes with Indonesian security forces were reported.

The crowd first raised the Indonesian flag and sang the Indonesian national anthem, before hoisting the separatist flag.

The huge crowd blocked the whole area surrounding the venue barring access to Indonesian security personnel, the daily said.

The flag-raising ceremony was led by the local West Papua representative, Yacomina Isir, and was followed by a mass Christian prayer led by a local Protestant priest.

The daily quoted the head of the Sorong district police, Lieutenant Colonel Ch. Sitorus as saying police had taken no action to stop the ceremony because they received no instructions.

Bomb attack on Kumaratunga was attempted coup: State media

COLOMBO, Jan 11: The suicide bomb attack on Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga was part of a wider conspiracy to stage a coup and establish a military regime, state media said Monday, reports AFP.

In banner headlines, the Daily News said a wealthy ethnic Tamil woman had been taken in for questioning over the assassination bid and more arrests were expected shortly.

The newspaper said police evidence of the plot, announced by state radio on Sunday, included several taped telephone conversations. Top businessmen were directly linked to the conspiracy, it claimed.

There are also reports that several army personnel too are linked to this alleged plot and there had been plans to capture power through a military coup if the president was killed in the town hall bomb blast," the Daily News said.

The state media also said two newspaper editors, which it did not name, were linked to the conspiracy, although their alleged roles were not specified.

Private newspaper editors and a media watch dog expressed fears that the government may use allegations of a conspiracy to crack down on journalists and crush media freedom ahead of parliamentary elections.

The Free Media Movement (FMM) described as "ludicrous" the charge that the editors were involved in a conspiracy to assassinate Kumaratunga and establish a military regime.

FMM convenor Varuna Karunatilake said they feared the government may use the "conspiracy theory" to arrest several media personalities and intimidate media organisations in the run-up to the polls.

Commentators said the reports stemmed from allegations made publicly by Kumaratunga who named two editors as those leading a smear campaign against her.

Chechens urge Moscow to start talks

MOSCOW, Jan 11: Chechen rebels called on Moscow to negotiate an end to the war in Chechnya or face a repeat of hit-and-run operations which killed at least 26 Russian servicemen over the weekend, Interfax reported Tuesday.

"We deliberately launched our operation at the moment when Moscow announced that it had established control over 80 per cent of Chechen territory, seized Grozny and encircled edeno," said Chechen chief of staff Momad Saayev.

Chechen guerrillas launched a series of daring raids over the weekend on Argun, eight km east of Grozny, and Shall, 25 km to the southeast, and the second city of Gudermes.

Moscow insists its forces control the towns and that the situation there is under control, however the rebels insist they still control key points of the settlements.

An Interfax correspondent confirmed the rebels still held the main buildings in Shall.

Saayev urged Moscow to begin talks immediately "to save the lives of thousands of Russian soldiers and officers, and to restore peace in Chechnya and in the whole of the North Caucasus."

"Only direct talks between the leaders of the Chechen Republic and the Russian Federation, and the signing of an agreement which suits both sides, can lead to this."

US, Britain to send officials to Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Jan 11: High-level British and US delegations arrive in Pakistan this week to try to push the country's military rulers to set a timeframe for a return to democracy, diplomats said today, reports Reuters.

A four-member Congressional delegation led by Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle arrives on Thursday, one day after Britain's chief of defence staff Sir Charles Guthrie was to arrive for a three-day visit.

"I know they will discuss the military's plans for a return to democratic government in Pakistan," a US Embassy official said.

The United States and Britain both strongly condemned the military coup in October which removed prime minister Nawaz Sharif and put General Pervez Musharraf in power, but have not called for Sharif to be returned to power.

Daschle's two-day visit was to have taken place before the coup but was delayed by a budget fight in the Congress. It will be the highest level US visit since Musharraf seized power.

The embassy official said he expected Daschle's talks with Musharraf to cover a range of topics, including regional security and the nuclear Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which Washington has been pressuring both Pakistan and India to sign.

Aceh students threaten mass disobedience campaign

JAKARTA, Jan 11: A group of 23 Indonesian student organisations on Tuesday demanded the government pull the military out of the restive province of Aceh, threatening a mass disobedience campaign if it didn't, reports AFP.

An activist for the South Aceh Student Communication Forum, Erwanto, said President Abdurrahman Wahid should immediately "stop human rights abuse in Aceh and the militarist approach towards Acehne people."

Erwanto was speaking at a press conference called by the student groups in the Aceh provincial administration office in Jakarta.

"Wahid should immediately form an independent and UN-supervised trial for Indonesian

Eid-ul-Fitr celebrated amid calls for peace in Asia

HONG KONG, Jan 11: Muslims across Asia celebrated Eid-ul-Fitr festival amid calls for peace, lavish displays of wealth and prayers for Chechnya, reports AFP.

In Putrajaya, Malaysia, tens of thousands thronged Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's new lavish official residence.

It was the first time the premier's new eight-billion-dollar administrative centre was opened to the public.

Mahathir, along with Malaysian King Sultan Salahuddin, Deputy Premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and several ministers, earlier performed prayers at the national mosque in the capital.

Visitors were given a food pack comprising traditional Malay food and cakes, leaving them to eat at their own pace instead of having to jostle for food in previous buffet treats.

In Afghanistan, supreme Taliban leader Mulla Mohammad Omar called for universal Muslim unity to stop Moscow's military operations in Chechnya.

Omar's Eid message was read to thousands of Taliban officials and locals at the capital's Eidgah congregational mosque.

As Taliban fighter jets flew overhead, he also slammed Washington for undermining the militia's designs to bring the whole country under one central religious rule.

"I expect the world Muslim leaders and people to get united and cut short the hands of tyrant and oppressive forces," he said.

In particular, they should hear the cries of the Chechen Muslims and seriously ask the Russians to stop their naked aggression against Chechnya," the message said.

Another 50,000 Muslims, including children and women, braved a dense early this morning fog and cold in New Delhi for an hour-long prayer held at the 17th-century Jama Masjid

mosque, India's largest.

All roads around the mosque were cut off by tens of thousands of Muslims, wearing traditional Indian kurtas, pyjamas and white caps.

A majority could not get near the mosque and stood on the roads to attend the prayer. Muslims then distributed money and food to poor people who lined the streets.

In neighbouring Pakistan Eid was expected to be celebrated amid tight security when it begins locally on Sunday, following a bomb blast that injured 18 people in the southern city of Hyderabad.

On the troubled island of Ambon in Indonesia thousands of Muslim residents held a peaceful Eid prayer at the Al-Fatah grand mosque including Maluku governor Saleh Latuconsina, the state Antara news agency said.

"The situation here is calm and quiet. Only one or two military cars were seen patrolling around the city. Residents in the Muslim area of Waihsong are conducting their daily activities," an AFP photographer said.

In his sermon, Antara quoted head of Maluku's Indonesian Council of Muslim Scholars (MUI) FR Hasanusi as calling on the public to show "self-restraint from all forms of provocation which could divide religious groups."

PTI adds: Eid-ul-Fitr was celebrated in Calcutta on Saturday peacefully, with the speakers at the main prayer congregation at Red Road condemning the released militant Masood Azhar's anti-Indian propaganda from Pakistan soil.

Thousands of devout Muslims offered prayers at the Red Road area, conducted by Hazrat Maulana Fazlur Rehman and organised by Calcutta Khilafat Committee, besides at the Park Circus Maidan, Nakhoda Mosque and at the Tipu Sultan Mosque.

Indian Sufi Samaj, a social organisation, held a prayer meeting in the city where speakers including former Union Education Minister P C Chunder, West Bengal Masjid Kalyan Committee Secretary Maulana Haji Abdullah Kaif, WBPC minority cell General Secretary Idris Ali and Sultan Ahmed (Congress MLA), demanded exemplary punishment of the hijackers of the Indian Airlines plane.

The meeting, presided over the Samaj General Secretary Mir Abdul Rehman, called the plane hijacking inhuman and an unIslamic act.

The Samaj regretted that Eid was not celebrated in several areas because of the way the announcement was made at the last moment.

Meanwhile, State Governor Viren J Shah greeted the people on the occasion of the Eid.

Musharraf to visit China

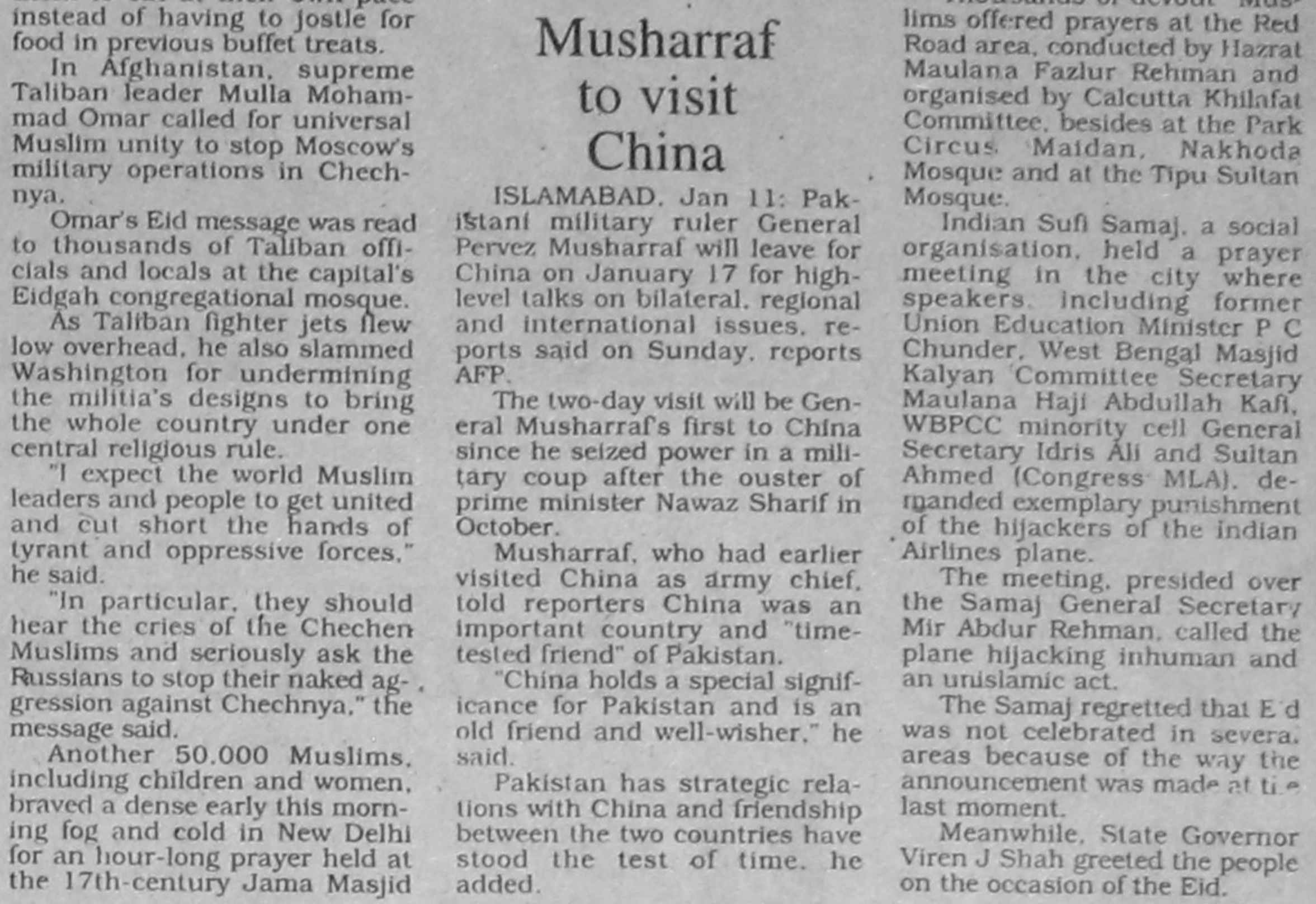
ISLAMABAD, Jan 11: Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf will leave for China on January 17 for high-level talks on bilateral, regional and international issues, reports said on Sunday, reports AFP.

The two-day visit will be General Musharraf's first to China since he seized power in a military coup after the ouster of prime minister Nawaz Sharif in October.

Musharraf, who had earlier visited China as army chief, told reporters China was an important country and "time-tested friend" of Pakistan.

"China holds a special significance for Pakistan and is an old friend and well-wisher," he said.

Pakistan has strategic relations with China and friendship between the two countries have stood the test of time, he added.



Indonesian soldiers stand guard during a demonstration in the Muslim area of Simpang AJ Pati, in Ambon yesterday. Some 100 Muslim students staged a demonstration to protest Indonesia's President Adurrahman Wahid's statement about changing Maluku Governor Saleh Latuconsina, following the continuing sectarian clashes since last year. —AFP photo

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Erwanto was speaking at a press conference called by the student groups in the Aceh provincial administration office in Jakarta.

"Wahid should immediately form an independent and UN-supervised trial for Indonesian

generals (who have committed rights violations in Aceh) ... and he should also immediately pull the Indonesian armed forces and police out of Aceh."

"If the government balks at meeting our demands, we will hold a civil disobedience (campaign) against the military in the form of massive strikes," Erwanto told journalists.

"We held a successful mass strike in August and the one million-man march in November ... our protest would be similar to the two events, but without bloodshed," he added.

The students however did not give a deadline, saying only the government "must act on our demands as of today."

Commenting on the government's plan to hold a special conference on the future of Aceh

in about three weeks in Medan, North Sumatra, Ari Maulana of the Student Solidarity for the People, said: "A conducive situation in Aceh is what's needed right now and not a conference."

Separately, spokesman of the Free Aceh (GAM) separatist movement, Abu Hadi, told AFP from Pidie district an elite police Britom unit had conducted "massive sweeping" operations in the Meureudu sub-district since Friday.

"The soldiers have beaten up so many people, they confiscated cars, motorcycles owned by residents here ... all under the name of a military operation to search for GAM," he said by telephone.

BRIEFLY

11 killed in China hotel fire: At least 11 people were killed and 18 injured when a fire broke out in a dance and gaming centre at the Jintuan Hotel in Xiangtan city, central Hunan Province, government officials said Tuesday, reports from Beijing.

The fire started Sunday evening when a worker placed towels on an electric heater in the hotel's third floor beauty salon, a spokesman for the Xiangtan city government told AFP.

The fire quickly spread to the hotel's sixth floor entertainment centre where a crowd of 50 people were gathered, the China Youth Daily said.

Park new PM of S Korea: South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung on Tuesday named the founder of the giant Pohang Iron and Steel Co, Park Tae-Joon, as his new prime minister, a news agency report said, AFP reports from Seoul.

Kim will formally request the National Assembly to approve Park's appointment Wednesday, Yonhap News Agency said. Following parliamentary confirmation, Kim will carry out a cabinet reshuffle around Thursday.

Chinese minister to visit Seoul: Chinese Defence Minister Chi Haotian will make a landmark visit to South Korea next week, the first by a Chinese defence chief since the two nations fought each other in the 1950-53 Korean War, officials said Tuesday, AFP reports from Seoul.

Seoul defence ministry officials said they hoped Chi's visit, slated for January 19-23, would help ease military tension on the Korean Peninsula. Chi will be the first Chinese defence minister to visit both Koreas, which remain technically still at war 47 years after the conflict ended in a tense truce.

Off the Record

Mysterious multimillionaire

KENOSHA, Wisconsin: Dozens of women showed up at a tavern over the weekend hoping for a shot at marrying a mysterious multimillionaire, reports AP.

Friday's event was one of several held around the United States to narrow the field of finalists who will compete in an upcoming Fox television network special, "Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?" to 50 women.

The unidentified bachelor then will make his choice, and the wedding will be shown before a live television audience.

"It would change my lifestyle," said Nicole Miley, 23, a cosmetologist from Fox Lake, Illinois. "It would be fun to share millions with someone. I want my future kids to have everything they want."

"I'm just tired of working three jobs, and I have nothing to lose," said Genny Marquez, 39, a commercial bank worker from Waukesha, Wisconsin.

Security fears grip Madonna

LONDON: US pop star Madonna has put her four million pound (\$6.55 million) London home back on the market because of security fears -- just weeks after buying it, reports Reuters.

The near-fatal stabbing of ex-Beatle George Harrison at his mansion near London just before New Year and the murder of BBC television presenter Jill Dando at her home in the British capital last April have shaken the rich and famous.

The Times newspaper said Madonna's security advisers had told her that the four-storey mansion she bought in London's trendy Chelsea district was totally unsuitable for a celebrity.

"We are talking about a house that is perfectly visible from the road," it quoted an unidentified source close to Madonna as saying.

Kumaratunga narrowly escaped assassination on December 18 when a woman suicide bomber, suspected to be a Tamil Tiger rebel, detonated explosives strapped to her body at an election rally in the capital Colombo.

Twenty-six people were killed, Kumaratunga, who might still lose complete use of her right eye, went on to win reelection three days later with 51.12 per cent of the popular vote.

Last week, the president went on national television and radio to accuse several business interests of supporting the attack blamed on the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The allegations of a coup bid came amid speculation the government is heading for an early parliamentary election to consolidate Kumaratunga's victory.

The present assembly can go on till August, but the president can call snap polls.

The allegations of a plot to form a military regime have also seriously embarrassed the military.

Military spokesman, brigadier Palitha Fernando, declined to comment on the charges that officers were involved.

"This is not a matter within my purview and I am unable to comment," Fernando said.

The main opposition United National Party (UNP), which was named by state radio as an accessory to the conspiracy, rejected the suggestion and said the government was trying to "kill democracy" with wild allegations.

"This is a conspiracy by the government to kill what ever democracy that is left," said UNP general secretary Gamini Athukorala.

To say that there was a conspiracy between army officers and the LTTE is an insult to the soldiers who died in battle in the past two decades."