

Separatist groups call strike in northeast India

GUWAHATI, Jan 15: Federal troops have been put on alert throughout of northeastern India following a strike call by separatist militants on January 26, India's Republic Day...

US warns Indonesian military against coup plot

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 15: The United States has warned Indonesia's military not to overthrow the country's new president and to cooperate with investigations into human rights abuses in East Timor...

such event. It would do Indonesia immense, perhaps irreparable damage, Holbrooke said in a conference call with US and Indonesian reporters Friday morning.

Holbrooke later told reporters at the United Nations that it was vitally important for Wahid, Attorney General Marzuki Darusman and others to ensure that the generals responsible for the violence in East Timor be prosecuted.

from Indonesia, which occupied it in 1975. A separate UN human rights commission has also submitted a report on atrocities in East Timor, while UN human rights investigators have recommended the Security Council establish a tribunal if Indonesia fails to carry out effective trials.

Holbrooke accused the military of hampering both probes, and of aiding militias that continue to prevent many of the estimated 700,000 East Timorese in Indonesian-controlled West Timorese refugee camps from returning home.

"The Indonesian military is still paying these people, still encouraging them, said Holbrooke, who visited the camps last year. "These are real thugs and they have to be dealt with."

Russian strikes on Grozny continue, oil depot hit

GROZNY, Jan 15: Russian warplanes bombed Grozny on Saturday, setting ablaze an oil depot at the main refinery that spewed thick black smoke over the battered Chechen capital...

in the southern mountains, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported. Russia on Friday had launched heavy air and artillery strikes on Chechen rebel positions and claimed to have killed scores of fighters...

despite the Russian reports of high rebel deaths, news media have begun increasingly questioning the Chechnya offensive amid reports of a sharp rise in Russian casualties.

Russia generally has reported only a few deaths each day, but this week reports surfaced of tens of soldiers dying daily. In a press release, the Defence Ministry called media reports of higher casualties "conscious lies."

Tamil leader assassinated in Lanka

COLOMBO, Jan 15: Suspected Tamil Tiger guerrillas have assassinated a regional Tamil politician and his bodyguard in northern Sri Lanka, officials said Saturday, reports AFP.

The head of the Point Pedro urban council, Vadiwell Nijeratanam, was shot dead near his council office on Friday night, officials said, adding that his body guard died of gunshot injuries Saturday.

Wijeratnam was a member of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and was believed to have been killed by the rival Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

A suspected Tiger rebel committed suicide by swallowing a cyanide capsule worn round his neck when he was about to be arrested in the northern town of Vavuniya on Friday, police said.

They said a pistol and two grenades were recovered from the victim.



Australian peacekeepers and UN civilian police push back some of the thousands of East Timorese waiting to submit their application forms for jobs with UN administration in Dili yesterday. The crowd later turned rowdy and pelted the soldiers with stones, injuring one. — AFP photo

Violence grips E Timor as thousands apply for UN jobs

DILI, East Timor, Jan 15: Violence broke out in Dili on Saturday when thousands of poor and unemployed East Timorese scrambled to apply for jobs offered by the United Nations administration, reports AP.

Some in the crowd of about 7,000 threw rocks at a small group of international peacekeeping troops and UN police officers. Witnesses said they were frustrated that their applications for about 2,000 available positions with the world body had been rejected.

About 70 foreign, mainly Australian, peacekeepers and UN civilian police protected UN administrative officials. Many took shelter behind walls. One Australian soldier and a television cameraman were injured by flying rocks.

Thousands of applicants had been waiting at Dili's main sports stadium since dawn to apply for a range of jobs with the United Nations, which has a two to three-year mandate to prepare East Timor for self-government.

US Marine arrested for attempted rape in Japan

TOKYO, Jan 15: A US Marine arrested in Japan for attempted rape was questioned by prosecutors Saturday, as tensions over the presence of American soldiers on the southern island of Okinawa were further heightened, reports AFP.

Lance Corporal Oswald McDonald was arrested nearly five years after relations with the US military were plunged into crisis in 1995 when three US Marines raped a 12-year-old girl on Okinawa.

"He was arrested on suspicion of attempting to rape the woman," said Hiroji Tama, a spokesman for Okinawa Police Department.

The suspect is back to the police station now, after being questioned at Okinawa prosecutors' Office in the morning," he said.

Japan likely to resume food aid to N Korea

TOKYO, Jan 15: Japan is likely to resume food aid to North Korea in March, offering 100,000 tonnes of rice, Jiji Press said Saturday, reports AFP.

Food aid was suspended in August 1998 after North Korea fired a missile over Japan. "In order to keep the dialogue between Japan and North Korea going, it would be necessary for Japan to provide a certain amount of rice," a foreign ministry official was quoted as saying.

Jiji said Tokyo would provide the some 100,000 tonnes of rice via an international organisation such as the World Food Program even if there was no progress on the issue of Japanese nationals allegedly kidnapped by North Korean agents.

If Pyongyang moves positively on the abduction issue, however, Tokyo would consider direct rice aid of several hundred thousands of tonnes, the news agency said.

At a meeting of Red Cross officials of the two countries in Beijing in late December, North Korea said it was facing a food shortage of between 1.2 million and 1.5 million tonnes, according to Jiji.

Israel to buy 50 F-16s from US

WASHINGTON, Jan 15: The US defence group Lockheed Martin on Friday said Israel had officially confirmed its intention to buy 50 of its F-16 fighter planes in a deal worth 1.8 billion dollars to the company, reports AFP.

"We are grateful to the government of Israel for its continued expression of confidence in the F-16, and our company, and we look forward to extending our mutually beneficial relationship with Israel for many years to come," said Dain Hancock, president of Texas-based Lockheed Martin Tactical Aircraft Systems.

The US Defence Department also announced the award bid estimated its value at 1.34 billion dollars. There was no immediate explanation for the difference in figures.

During a visit to Washington in July, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak told President Bill Clinton that Israel had decided to buy the F-16 fighter rather than the F-15, manufactured by Lockheed rival Boeing.

Spanish judge seeks fresh medical tests for Pinochet

MADRID, Jan 15: Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon on Friday challenged Britain's moves to release former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and sought fresh medical tests with Spanish doctors taking part, legal sources said, reports AFP.

Garzon, who initiated the extradition demand that led to Pinochet's detention in Britain in October 1998, also sought British permission to question the 84-year-old former junta leader.

With expectations mounting that Pinochet could fly home early next week, Britain also faced new pressure from other governments and rights groups over its moves to free Pinochet because of his health.

Pinochet will return to Chile a few days after presidential elections on Sunday, his children told a Santiago newspaper. They said that if all went well, their father would reach Chile on Tuesday, in a military airplane with a medical team.

But Garzon wants a new examination with court-appointed Spanish doctors taking part, said Joan Garces, a lawyer for victims of the Pinochet regime.

British medical experts deemed Pinochet, who has been under house arrest in a mansion near London since his detention, unfit to stand trial.

Britain's Home Secretary Jack Straw said this week he was "minded" to release Pinochet for health reasons though the contents of the medical exams were not released.

Straw is to announce a final decision next Tuesday after hearing from all the parties involved.

Garzon has sent his request to the British minister, the Spanish legal sources said. A copy of his document, seen by AFP, said Spanish law required a copy of a medical report to end its own case.

"Given that the British authorities are not in a position to transmit the details to the Spanish courts, the judge requested a second medical examination with the participation of court-appointed Spanish doctors," Garces said.

Lankan ruling party mulls defection law to win opposition MPs

COLOMBO, Jan 15: Sri Lanka's main ruling party plans to legislate to enable opposition MPs to defect to the government and bolster its bid to end the country's ethnic war, reports Reuters.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party will table a "defection bill" which, if passed, would enable the defectors, possibly dozens of them, to sit with the government without the need for fresh elections, party officials and state media said on Saturday.

Under the constitution, MPs are barred from switching parties once elected. The ruling People's Alliance is seeking a two-thirds parliamentary majority — enough to push through constitutional reforms aimed at ending 16 years of war with ethnic Tamil separatists.

If the defection bill fails, the government will call early parliamentary elections and fight the campaign on the issue of constitutional reform, the officials said.

The ruling coalition wants to change the constitution to devolve more powers to regional councils, including one run by minority Tamils, to partly meet the demand by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for a separate homeland.

But the draft constitution has been stuck in parliament for more than two years. Five MPs from the main opposition United National Party (UNP) decided to support the government just before last month's residential polls won by the incumbent Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Man builds church alone

BEGRAD, Jan 15: Dragojevic took 17 years to build a church single-handed in his village southeast of Belgrade, the daily Politika Ekspres reported Saturday, says AFP.

Dragojevic drew up the plan, built the walls, did the structural work and decorated the interior of the church in Grac near Smederevska Palanka, 70 kilometres from the capital, the newspaper said.

The work would have taken less time had Dragojevic not encountered some administrative problems with the then-communist regime, which did not look kindly on his enterprise.

But Dragojevic said: "I had faith from the very first day. Without that faith I could never have done all that."

758 candidates barred from Iran polls

TEHRAN, Jan 15: A conservative-controlled vetting body has barred 758 candidates, including nine sitting MPs, from standing in key parliamentary elections next month, Iran's reformist-led interior ministry said Saturday, reports AFP.

More than half of those barred from the February 18 polls -- 402 candidates -- had passed a preliminary vetting by the interior ministry, the official IRNA news agency said.

The wholesale rejection of so many candidates -- most of them supporters of reformist President Mohammad Khatami or members of the tolerated opposition -- has sparked an outcry from the reformers who had hoped to end the conservatives' control of parliament which has blocked the president's reforms.

Many loyal individuals, who have rendered valuable service to the revolution" have been disqualified, the head of the ministry's elections office, Javad Ghadimi-Zakeri, complained Wednesday.

Israel-Syria talks to resume amid uncertainty

WASHINGTON, Jan 15: A third round of Israel-Syria peace talks is set to kick off next week amid growing uncertainty as to whether progress is possible on the key border issue and unease from the US hosts over the leak of a draft treaty to an Israeli newspaper, reports AFP.

The negotiations are to resume on Wednesday after having left off in Shepherdstown, West Virginia on January 11 with few concrete results other than the presentation to the delegations of a US-created "working document" outlining areas of agreement and dispute between the two sides.

However, the seven-page document which is designed to be a blueprint for a final peace treaty, indicates apparent intractability between the two sides -- particularly on Israel's withdrawal from the Golan Heights and the fate of Jewish settlers on the strategic plateau.

Israel has not proposed a specific boundary line for its withdrawal but insists that it be decided with its security interests in mind, while Syria demands a return to the pre-1967 border before Israel seized the Golan.

Mother, 4 children killed in Pakistan

Attackers brutally hacked to death a divorced woman and her four young children in a rural town in central Pakistan, police said Saturday, AFP reports from Multan, Pakistan.

The victims' mutilated bodies were found in their home in Chowkasm in the district of Leyia in central Punjab province. The attackers broke into the house Friday night and fled after the attack, a Punjab police official said. He said an investigation was under way into the killings which appeared to be an "act of vendetta."

The nine-article US document does not detail the proposed frontier, saying only that a joint boundary commission would be established upon the signing of the treaty to create a "permanent, secure and recognised boundary" which supercedes any previous border or line of demarcation.

Neither does it offer "bridging proposals" on any issue, and since the details were made public on Thursday when the Israeli newspaper Haaretz published a leaked copy of the US draft document, both Israel and Syria have further hardened their stances, weakening chances of compromise.

New President of Guatemala

Alfonso Portillo was sworn in as Guatemala's president Friday, becoming the first elected president to take office since a December 1996 peace agreement ended the 36-year-old civil war, AFP reports from Guatemala City.

Portillo succeeds Alvaro Arzu, who was elected president in January 1996 and who played a key role in concluding the peace agreement. Portillo received the oath of office from the newly elected president of Congress, retired general Efraim Rios Montt, who led a de facto government for 18 months in 1982-1983.

In addition, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who is



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