

## International

Musharraf begins China visit today

ISLAMABAD, Jan 16: Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf flies to China tomorrow for his first international visit outside the Arab world since seizing power in a coup three months ago, reports AFP.

Musharraf is travelling with a high-level team for the two-day trip, including Foreign Minister Abdus Sattar and Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz.

China has long been a crucial ally, providing vital military equipment and acting as a counterweight to Pakistan's arch-rival India and the influence of Russia.

"China is Pakistan's most trusted and close friend," said foreign ministry spokesman Tariq Alfaifi.

"Our time-tested ties have gained strength and substance over the years. Pakistan-China relations remain a cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy."

Pakistan was one of the first countries to recognise the People's Republic of China in 1950.

## 50 killed in Colombia fighting

BOGOTA, Jan 16: In some of the worst fighting in months, clashes between leftist rebels and security forces near Bogota killed 50 people Saturday, the same day US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited northern Colombia, reports AP.

Rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, staged an early morning attack on Guayabetal, 48 kilometres southeast of Bogota, Colombia's capital.

Fighting in the region continued into Saturday night.

The Colombian government and FARC also held peace talks Saturday in a southern jungle. It was not clear if the rebel attack was meant as a show of force to coincide with the peace talks or Albright's visit.

# Malaysia hits back at US criticism

## Washington urged not to interfere

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 16: Malaysia Sunday lashed out at US criticism of the arrest of leading opposition figures, telling Washington to stay out of its internal affairs, but refusing to say whether more arrests were planned, reports AFP.

"If an offence has been committed then action has to be taken. Our country has laws ... not the law of the jungle. Don't interfere in our affairs."

Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi denied that the five arrests last week, which have drawn widespread overseas condemnation, amounted to a crackdown on the opposition.

US State Department spokesman James Foley Friday said the department shared "widely expressed concerns that these arrests are a transparent and cynical attempt to intimidate government opponents, and stifle legitimate political discourse."

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had to enforce its laws strictly. "He (Foley) does not know what is happening here. This is our country and we will manage our own problems and we will solve them," he said.

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## Taiwan passes bills to ban military role in politics

TAIPEI, Jan 16: Taiwan's Parliament has passed two bills to further ensure the military would play no role amid efforts to press for political reforms, official said today, reports AFP.

The draft National Defence Law and the draft amendment to Defence Ministry Organic Law cleared the legislative floor late Saturday night shortly before the parliament adjourned.

The completion of the two bills, following the bid to cut the size of the forces, was another crucial step to reform the existing military structure, a defence ministry spokesman said.

The purpose of the bills, he said, was aimed to set up a military mechanism which is

modern, professional, and democratic."

Under the bills, the Nationalist island's defence ministry would be led by a civil official rather than a military official, and the Chief of the General Staff, now responsible directly to the president, would be placed under the direct jurisdiction of the defence ministry.

The decades-old "political warfare" force would be scaled back as well.

Calls are on the rise for the removal of the units, which have been largely in charge of the Nationalist army's ideology controls in their struggles against Chinese communist forces in the wake of the island's democratisation.

In three years the general warfare department, which has been placed under the direct jurisdiction of the general staff headquarters for nearly five decades, would be reorganised as a political warfare bureau.

The head of the office would be downgraded from a general to a lieutenant general.

Taiwan plans to cut the number of its troops from 450,000 to 400,000 by June 2000 although its firepower has been boosted by 75 per cent.

The Nationalist government fled the mainland in 1949 at the end of a civil war after its troops were defeated by communist forces led by Mao Zedong.

## Obuchi faces fresh challenge after tour

TOKYO, Jan 16: Japan's Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi came down to earth today from a high-profile Asian tour as he faced fresh challenges to his power from within and without his conservative party, reports AFP.

The main opposition Democratic Party vowed to seek an early general election to topple Obuchi's ruling coalition, the morning after the premier returned after pledging aid during a tour of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

Obuchi's rivals within his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) already called for an end to the three-way coalition and blasted him for focusing too much on stimulus spending to turn the country around from a mountain of debt.



More than 150,000 Cubans rally for the return of the shipwrecked boy Elian Gonzalez Saturday in Havana. For a second consecutive day, tens of thousands of Cubans rallied to demand the return of the boy, who was rescued off the coast of Florida in late November and is claimed by his relatives in Miami.

—AFP photo

## Pakistan should resist Western pressure: Press

ISLAMABAD, Jan 16: Pakistan's military rulers should resist increasing Western pressure for a quick return to democracy, major newspapers here said today, reports AFP.

In three separate visits in the past week five senior US senators and Britain's chief of defence staff have held meetings with army chief General Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in a coup three months ago.

The visitors called on Musharraf and his ministers to revive democracy, curb fundamentalist groups and sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban treaty, the papers said.

But giving into Western de-

mands would weaken Pakistan's sovereignty. The News daily said in an editorial.

The widely-respected newspaper criticised the country's politicians for trying to win support from the West for a reversal of democracy.

"There is an irony in all these urgings for the Western nations are not prepared to accept the argument that the present set-up is preferable to the previous corrupt civilian rulers," it said.

"Democracy in Pakistan is the business of the people of Pakistan," the paper said.

This aspect of engagement with the West undercuts Pakistan's sovereignty and shows

the political leadership in poor light."

Another major paper, The Frontier Post, said the democratic option was not as attractive as it seemed from outside Pakistan.

"There is an irony in all these urgings for the Western nations are not prepared to accept the argument that the present set-up is preferable to the previous corrupt civilian rulers," it said.

"While most Pakistanis have had a bafiful of self-serving and corrupt politicians, the world believes democracy however flawed is still a better alternative," the paper said.

## Anti-drug drive in Myanmar

### 50,000 villagers to be relocated

KENG TUNG, Myanmar, Jan 16: The Myanmar government is launching an unprecedented relocation of 50,000 people out of prime opium growing areas under an ambitious programme to turn one of the world's biggest narcotics-producing zones into a drug-free area by 2005, reports AP.

The territory is controlled by the United Wa State Army, described by the US State Department as the world's largest drug-trafficking organisation and Southeast Asia's leading producer of heroin reaching the United States.

The Wa are former insurgents who made peace with the military in 1989. They retain their weapons under the agreement and exercise control over large areas of Myanmar's rugged border with Thailand and China, enabling them to become major producers of heroin and, increasingly, lucrative methamphetamine.

Both the government's anti-drug czar, Col Kyaw Thein,

and Wa leaders told reporters flown by the government into Wa territory on Saturday that they are committed to eradicating drugs from Myanmar, also known as Burma, within 15 years, with the biggest areas being taken out of production by 2005.

Toward that end, some 50,000 people in Wa-controlled areas near China — where little but opium can grow on the steep, rocky hillsides — will be moved to new agricultural areas near Thailand where it is hoped they will make a living growing crops and raising livestock.

"We have designated 2005 as the year of the narcotics-free zone," said Khin Maung Myint, a liaison officer for the War army. "My feeling is that only when these projects become a success, we will be able to eradicate the drug problem."

The announcement is bound to be greeted with skepticism in international law enforcement circles. The Myanmar govern-

ment is widely accused of benefiting from drug money. The regime has few sources of hard currency because of decades of mismanagement and economic sanctions imposed for its repression of the democratic opposition and ethnic minorities.

The government denies that it is in league with drug traffickers but confesses that because of its political pariah status, it has received little of the international aid that over the past 30 years has enabled neighbouring Thailand to wipe out most of its opium fields.

"We have been blamed for drugs for so long now," Kyaw Thein said. "We do not want to be blamed forever."

But Khin Maung Myint acknowledged that three Wa leaders, Wei Xuekang, Li Zhi and Tao Yiqiang, were advisors to the opium eradication project. The State Department alleges the trio are among the top drug traffickers in the region.



Myanmar soldiers destroy opium poppies with sticks Saturday during a narcotics crop destruction in Lwe Sone Range, as part of a broader campaign by Myanmar authorities to eradicate the plant. —AFP photo

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"As far as I know," he added, "nobody has asked for political asylum."

Fernandez, a socialist, is a long-time supporter of the Tibetan campaign and president of the Indo-Tibet Friendship Society. said the Karmapa must be given the same status as the Dalai Lama, the Tibetans' spiritual leader.

The 17th Karmapa has not revealed his future plans, but he told Tibetan solidarity groups who met him at Dharamsala four days ago that he was pleased to be in India.

China has suggested that granting political asylum would violate a Sino-Indian bilateral agreement on non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

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relations. And I don't think we should be upset over anything related to that.

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## Voting begins in Finnish presidential elections

HELSINKI, Jan 16: Voting began this morning in Finland's first round of presidential elections with the two leading candidates neck-and-neck, reports AFP.

The latest poll gave Foreign Minister Tarja Halonen 38 per cent support, and opposition Centre Party leader Esko Aho 37 percent, with the five other candidates well behind.

Sudan's Islamist-led government has extended a ceasefire with rebels in the south for another three months, newspapers reported Sunday. Reuters reports from Khartoum.

They quoted a Foreign Ministry statement as saying the truce had been prolonged from midnight, January 15, to support peace efforts and enable emergency supplies to reach the south.

The extension comes within the context of the search for peace and a comprehensive solution to the problem in the south and the delivery of relief aid to the needy, said Hassan Abdin, undersecretary at the foreign ministry.

Plane crash kills 4: A commercial plane crashed in a residential neighbourhood in Costa Rica's capital Saturday, killing four people and injuring 14, emergency officials said. AP reports from San Jose.

The twin-engine plane with 20 people on board had just taken off from Tobia Bolanos Airport in San Jose when it crashed at 1:10 pm (0210 BST). Red Cross spokesman Guillermo Arroyo said the plane, a Czech-built LED 410, had been leased by Taxi Aero Centro Americano and was bound for the Toriquero national park on the Atlantic Coast of northern Costa Rica. It carried 17 passengers and three crew members.

A surgeon from the city's Emergency Centre said he had been hit at least three times in the face and was dead on arrival at the centre.

"He was hit in the mouth, eye and temple. The nature of the wounds indicates he was shot at close range," the surgeon, who declined to be named, told Reuters.

Two others died, one of them

## Suspected war criminal killed in Belgrade

BELGRADE, Jan 16: Assassins have slain notorious Serb paramilitary leader and war crimes suspect Zeljko "Arkan" Raznatovic in a Belgrade hotel, reports Reuters.

Political opponents of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic said they thought Arkan's killers, who fired at least 38 bullets at close range in the hotel lobby on Saturday afternoon, would never be identified.

A paramilitary who struck fear into hearts across the Balkans, Arkan was also a convicted bank robber and a former politician believed to have once had close ties to Milosevic's ruling circle.

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## Israeli police launch probe into Weizman over scandal

JERUSALEM, Jan 16: A special Israeli police team launched a probe today into a financial scandal engulfing Israeli President Ezer Weizman as press calls for his resignation grew louder, reports AFP.

"Unfit to Serve" thundered the headline over the editorial in the liberal Hebrew newspaper Haaretz.

The special team was to hold its first working meeting Sunday morning, a police spokesman said, more than two weeks after an Israeli journalist first revealed that Weizman had secretly accepted almost half a million dollars in gifts from a French millionaire before he took office in 1993.

The probe is being led by police commissioner Yohanan Danino, who normally deals with investigations into car thefts, three investigators and a member of Attorney General Eliyahu Rubin.

Weizman, 75, is accused of accepting 453,000 dollars from French businessman Edouard Saroussi.

## Kashmir militants kill politician, five others