

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 Shaikat 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 Altair.

"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 Guayabal, 45 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.

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."

But Abdullah said Malaysia

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.

"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."

Abdullah, who is also home minister and heir apparent to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, said the public should not get "excited" over the arrests as police would investigate the complaints with caution.

Asked if more arrests were planned, he told reporters: "We won't say how many people are going to be arrested. If there are reports and evidence that a person can be charged, action will be taken."

A leading opposition figure Sunday condemned the arrests as "the negative politics of spite, hate and vendetta."

Lim Kit Siang predicted that Mahathir would exceed "the worst excesses" of his 19 years as prime minister during his final term since all checks to his power had been dismantled.

Lim, chairman of the Democratic Action Party (DAP), told a party meeting that Malaysians had hoped politics would become less dominated by race and religion and more by "justice, freedom, democracy and good governance."

But he said events since the November 29 election, in which Mahathir's National Front (Barisan Nasional) coalition retained its two-thirds parliamentary majority, indicated otherwise.

Mahathir, 74, has said this will be his last term. He came to power in 1981.

"The final term of Mahathir as prime minister will be the most dangerous times for Malaysia. National building as all external checks and balances have been dismantled while there are no countervailing forces inside UMNO and Barisan Nasional to give him a reality check," Lim said in a speech.

The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) is the National Front's dominant party.

Charged in court Friday with sedition were Karpal Singh, counsel for deposed and jailed deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, and Marina Yusoff, vice-president of the National Justice Party formed by Anwar's wife.



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

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.

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 revival of democracy.

"The proper course of action to pressure the military-led government to hold elections is to canvass for public support -- not beg for US intervention," said The News in an editorial.

"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 bellyful 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 narcotic 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 can 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 Xuegang, Li Zuri and Pao Yungang, 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 boppies with sticks Saturday during a narcotics crop destruction in Lwe. Sone Rangé, as part of a broader campaign by Myanmar authorities to eradicate the narcotic trade in the country. —AFP photo

Suspected war criminal killed in Belgrade

BELGRADE, Jan 16: Assaults have slain a 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.

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 a stomach injuries."

Arkan had been living in Belgrade since he fled from his role in the 1990s Balkan wars.

"What did I do? I'm trying to survive," he told a friend 10 days ago who asked how he was. The friend, who requested anonymity, told Reuters he had met him by chance in central Belgrade after a long time and was surprised he did not have as many bodyguards around as usual.

The official news agency Tanjug said Arkan was attacked by masked gunmen, but a police source said they were not masked. Police found 38 bullet casings on the floor at the scene, where two other people were also mortally wounded.

Britain and the United States said they took no satisfaction from Arkan's murder. He was indicted in 1997 by the Hague-based International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for crimes against humanity, including alleged atrocities in Croatia in 1991 and in the 1992-95 Bosnian war. He denied the charges.

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 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 Elyakim Rubinstein's office.

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

Kashmir militants kill politician, five others

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 16: Muslim guerrillas shot dead a pro-India Indian politician, three of his family members and a policeman in the troubled Indian state of Kashmir, officials said today, reports AFP.

A former militant now working with Indian security forces was also killed by the guerrillas elsewhere in the Himalayan state. All killings occurred late Saturday, a police spokesman said.

Muslim militants armed with AK-47 assault rifles stormed into the home of Ghulam Qadir Bhat, a top leader of Kashmir's ruling National Conference party, near Avantipura town, 30 km south of here.

They first shot dead one of Bhat's five police bodyguards, then entered the house and gunned down Bhat, who was popularly known as Hindustani, and three family members from close range.

The other police guards fought a brief gunbattle with the attackers, wounding one of them. However the wounded

militant was taken away by the other retreating guerrillas.

Indian police and paramilitary forces immediately launched a massive combing operation in the region to track down the killers, the spokesman said.

No further details were immediately available.

Also overnight, another group of Muslim militants shot dead a former militant, Ghulam Qadir Hoora, who belonged to a group which assists the Indian security forces in their campaign against Muslim separatists.

The killing took place at Hoora's home in a village near Sonwari town in northern Kashmir. Three unidentified civilians were also wounded in the attack. The killers escaped.

More than 24,000 people have died in a bloody Muslim separatist campaign raging in Kashmir since 1989. India accuses Pakistan of arming and training the militants. Islamabad denies this, but gives open support to the unrest.

Heavy fighting in Grozny

NEAR GROZNY, Russia, Jan 16: Russian bombs and rockets rained down on the Chechen capital Grozny overnight and on Sunday federal forces intensified strikes on rebel bastions in the southern mountains, where fierce clashes were reported, reports AFP.

Plumes of thick black smoke and dust rose from central and eastern districts of Grozny which bore the brunt of a pounding that the Russian military said was needed to cover its advancing troops.

The barrage, which thundered throughout the night and was continuing Sunday, was one of the heaviest in recent days, an AFP reporter said, and came as European lawmakers were due in Moscow to discuss Russia's bloody campaign in the rebel republic.

The Council of Europe dele-

gation, led by British peer Lord Russell-Johnston, was to meet acting President Vladimir Putin on Monday as part of a five-day fact-finding tour triggered by concerns over human rights and the cost of the conflict in civilian lives.

The group from the parliamentary assembly is scheduled to fly to the troubled North Caucasus for talks with regional leaders, and could visit Russian-controlled zones of Chechnya, news reports said.

The visit came as a servicemen's support group said at least 3,000 federal soldiers had died in the current conflict and accused the authorities of seeking to cover up the true extent of losses in the 15-week drive in Chechnya.

Officially, Russia has admitted to around 500 dead since ground operations in Chechnya

began on October 1.

Russia has intensified military operations in the republic in recent days as it sought to wrest the initiative from the guerrillas, whose during series of raids last weekend flat-footed federal commanders and led to heavy Russian losses.

Oleg, the commander of one Russian unit near the Grozny frontline, said the massive artillery blitz was vital if his men were to advance and wipe out the guerrillas defending the capital.

"When there are artillery strikes or air strikes, the rebels hide and we can advance. That's what we did, but as soon as things die down a bit, they re-emerge," he said.

"They were shooting at us from all sides. Our task now is to wipe out all the rebels around us."



Children wearing clown costumes sit on a vintage car in Calcutta yesterday. More than 150 vintage cars and two wheelers took to the streets of Calcutta in a vintage and classic car rally. —AFP photo

Israel delays WB pullout

JERUSALEM, Jan 16: Israel decided Saturday to postpone a withdrawal from the West Bank for at least two weeks over a dispute with the Palestinians on the land to be included in the pullout, reports AP.

A spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office said the Cabinet would not view the withdrawal maps in a meeting Sunday as a prerequisite to the withdrawal, which was originally slated for Thursday.

Barak hasn't decided which lands should be included in the withdrawal, Gadi Baltinsky said. Barak wants to check a few more subjects and continue the internal discussions.

The decision meant the withdrawal will most likely be postponed for at least two weeks, since Barak will travel to the United States for the next

round of peace talks with the Syrians, which are slated to begin Wednesday.

The Palestinians have accused Israel of neglecting the peace talks with them in favour of the Syrian negotiations, which reopened in December.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Cabinet warned in a meeting Friday that Israeli sluggishness in the negotiations will prevent the sides from working out a framework on a final peace agreement by a February 13 deadline.

The Palestinians had demanded that the next withdrawal include areas near east Jerusalem — the sector they hope to make the capital of a future state — as part of the redeployment that is supposed to include 6.1 per cent of the West Bank.

Israel insists that any changes in control over the territory near the disputed city would be decided in the final phase of peace talks between the sides. Israel says that the peace accords designate it as the sole deciding authority on which land is included in withdrawals.

Israel captured east Jerusalem in 1967, declaring the sector part of its capital. Enraged Israelis insist the city will not be divided again as part of the negotiation with the Palestinians.

Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh implied Friday that the Palestinians may be given some authority in areas east of Jerusalem when he said the boundaries of the city may be extended as part of a final agreement.