

Palestinians vow to declare state this year

Peace talks break down again

GAZA CITY, Feb 4: The Palestinians vowed they will declare an independent state this year after another round of peace talks with Israel on Thursday again ended in stalemate and frustration, reports AFP.

Aides said Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was "beside himself" with anger after a much-trumpeted summit meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak on Wednesday ended in stalemate and frustration, reports AFP.

The looming February 13 deadline for a framework peace deal seemed beyond reach after Arafat abruptly walked out of the meeting and even Barak, who took office seven months ago pledging to deliver Middle East peace, acknowledged the talks were in serious trouble.

The holy city of Jerusalem is the capital of independent Palestinian state and there will never be peace until it is re-

turned to us," the PLO's central council insisted in its declaration here late Thursday.

This national decision will not be negotiated or revoked," it said, vowing to declare a state this year, with Jerusalem as its capital, no matter where talks stand with the Israelis.

The council believes that Israel's failure to honour its commitments demonstrates its lack of seriousness about making peace," it said.

The statement, hammered out at a meeting here of the PLO's second-highest body, came just hours after the high-profile summit — the first public meeting of the two leaders since November — fell apart over the land dispute.

Arafat left the meeting at the Erez border crossing after more than two hours of tense talks with Barak and an official said the Palestinian leader was furious about Israel's demands during the encounter.

He said Arafat was "beside himself" after Barak allegedly tried to push back the February 13 deadline for a framework accord that had been set out in September's landmark Sharm el-Sheikh peace deal.

The official said the Israelis had also refused Arafat's request for US mediation to unblock the dispute, which centred on a transfer of 6.1 per cent more West Bank land that had been due to take place in January.

Both sides acknowledged the differences arose over Palestinian insistence that the transferred land be adjacent to 9 areas outside Jerusalem already under Palestinian control.

In a speech to his Labour Party's political bureau in Tel Aviv, Barak admitted the negotiations were in turmoil, even though his Foreign Minister David Levy earlier in the day

had downplayed talk of a crisis. "The talks with the Palestinians are going through a difficult patch marked by significant tensions and substantial differences," he said.

The Israeli security cabinet gave the green light Wednesday to the 6.1 per cent West Bank withdrawal demanded under the Sharm agreement, fixing February 10 for the move, three weeks after the scheduled deadline.

But Israel once again apparently did not consult the Palestinians on the map for the land handover, which if completed would leave the Palestinian Authority with full or partial control over 40 per cent of the West Bank.

Arafat spokesman Marwan Kanafani accused Israel of "wasting" the last four or five months by failing to implement agreements that had already been ratified by both sides.

Indian PM defends deal with hijackers

NEW DELHI, Feb 4: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee defended today his government's decision to swap three jailed Muslim militants for the hostages held during last month's Indian Airlines hijacking, reports AFP.

"We had to take a decision despite knowing that it would evoke criticism," Vajpayee was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India.

"Had the hostages been my family members, I would not have thought for a moment to sacrifice them," he said in an address at a religious function in New Delhi.

Vajpayee's government was widely criticised for striking a deal with the hijackers who had demanded the release of the jailed militants in exchange for nearly 160 passengers and crew aboard the Indian Airlines plane they hijacked on Christmas Eve and took to Kandahar in Afghanistan.

Critics of the swap said it would encourage terrorists to target India in the future.

India has accused Pakistan of involvement in the hijacking — a charge Islamabad denies.

"Hijacking is not a brave act. The brave act was to dislodge intruders entrenched atop the Kargil heights when our brave troops were down below," Vajpayee said, referring to last year's conflict between Indian troops and Pakistan-backed guerillas in Kashmir.



Austrian President Thomas Klestil (C) watches as Austrian far-right leader Joerg Haider (R) shakes hands with conservative People's Party leader Wolfgang Schuessel after they signed a coalition government accord on Thursday in Vienna. Klestil withheld approval of a governing coalition between the far-right Freedom Party and conservative People's Party pending further study of their programme, the APA news agency said. — AFP photo

Russia demands release of detained ship

MOSCOW, Feb 4: Russia called again Friday for a Russian tanker detained by the US Navy in the Persian Gulf to be released immediately, reports AP.

"We imperatively demand the immediate release of the Russian tanker," Deputy Foreign Minister Vasily Sredin, told the ITAR-Tass news agency. "We shall get it back and save both the ship and crew."

A US Navy ship stopped the merchant vessel Volgoneft-147 off the coast of the United Arab Emirates on Wednesday and took oil samples to determine whether it was carrying Iraqi oil in violation of a United Nations trade embargo.

Russian Transport Minister Sergei Frank said Thursday that the tanker was carrying fuel oil from Iran to various ports in the Emirates when it was detained.

Sredin said contact had been established with the ship's captain "and all the circumstances were cleared up." ITAR-Tass reported. He said that diplomats worked overnight to defuse the situation.

The tanker's captain, Abkhat Khasanov, telephoned the Russian Embassy in the United Arab Emirates. He reported that none of the 18 crew members was injured during the boarding of his ship.

Primakov drops out of presidential race

MOSCOW, Feb 4: Former Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov today announced that he was dropping out of the March 26 presidential elections, reports AFP.

"After long reflection, I really did make the final decision not to participate in the Russian presidential elections," Primakov told RTR television.

Primakov was considered one of the leading contenders to the front-running acting President Vladimir Putin in the race. "I will not hide the fact that this was not an easy decision," Primakov said, adding that he made up his mind after Putin struck a controversial alliance with the Communists in parliament that froze the opposition out of power.

Primakov added that Russian society was far removed from "true democracy."

Indonesian army chief dispels coup rumours

JAKARTA, Feb 4: The fate of Indonesia's powerful security minister Gen. Wiranto, who refuses to quit after being blamed for atrocities in East Timor, will not be settled until the president returns from overseas, a senior official said today, reports AP.

Meanwhile, army chief of staff Gen. Tyaono Sudarto sought to dispel lingering rumours that military commanders loyal to security minister Gen. Wiranto may try to overthrow Wahid, the head of state.

"I guarantee as an institution the Indonesian army will not launch a coup," Sudarto told reporters.

Wahid is engaged in a deepening power struggle with Wiranto, a former military commander accused by government investigators of allowing pro-Indonesian militia gangs to devastate East Timor after the territory voted to break away from Indonesia in August.

Wiranto, who led the Indonesian armed forces at the time, denied any responsibility

for the mayhem. He has ignored repeated calls this week from Wahid — who is on a tour of 13 European and Asian nations — to resign from the Cabinet.

Wahid said he had instructed Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono to ask Wiranto to step down immediately.

Addressing reporters on Friday, Sudarsono said: "I have done my duty." The defence minister said Wiranto did not react to the order.

"Let us be patient and wait until president (Wahid) returns on Feb. 13," Sudarsono said, without elaborating whether Wiranto would resign or not.

Speaking in The Hague, the Netherlands, Wahid said on Thursday that a group of army generals had met in the Chinatown district of the Indonesian capital, not far from the presidential palace.

"We fully control the situation, so they have to be careful about what they are doing," Wahid said during a joint news conference with Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok.

The president said he had ordered armed forces head Adm. Widodo Adisutjipto and national police chief Gen. Rusdihardjo to crack down on any attempt to disrupt public order.

On Friday Wiranto met his lawyer, Adnan Buyung Nasution, who later said the government inquiry had failed to produce any evidence implicating his client East Timor's violence.

Attorney General Marzuki Darusman is to decide within three months on whether to launch prosecutions.

The government report that condemns Wiranto and five other senior generals echoes the findings of a separate UN inquiry, which also blamed Indonesian forces for the violence.

Wahid assumed office in October as the first freely elected head of state in 44 years. Since then he has antagonized the military elite by whittling away at their position and power. He replaced Wiranto as army chief and has insisted that he become a civilian.



A Santiago boy lights a candle as a human rights group protest the military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet on Thursday in the Chilean capital. The group also protested the possible return of Pinochet to Chile. — AFP photo

Anwar ends testimony in sex trial

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 4: Jailed former Malaysian finance minister Anwar Ibrahim today finished testifying in his eight-month-old sex trial and the defence said it might need up to six weeks to conclude its case, reports Reuters.

"I was just going to give some good news to the court, that we've finished with Datuk Seri Anwar," Chief defence counsel Christopher Fernando told High Court Judge Arifin Jaka after the former minister had testified for the 19th day.

But Fernando told Reuters the case was far from over as Anwar's adopted brother Sukma Darmawan, standing trial with him for sodomy, and a dozen potential defence witnesses had yet to testify.

"There could be another four to six weeks of defence testimony," the lawyer said after Judge Arifin adjourned the hearing to Tuesday.

Fernando also said Anwar's appeal against his corruption conviction in April would start at the Court of Appeal on February 28.

The politically sensitive sex trial, which began in June and has exposed deep political divisions in Malaysia, has been bogged down by numerous disruptions.

The delays included a month-long hospitalisation for Anwar mid-way through his testimony and two-month break taken by the judge to rest his back.

China prepares for lunar new year

BEIJING, Feb 4: Chinese left work early, well-behaved prisoners went home and the communist leadership longed to reunify with Taiwan as China prepared Friday for the Lunar New Year, the biggest holiday and a time for family reunions, reports AP.

"At this occasion of reunion for millions of families, we miss our Taiwan compatriots more than ever," Premier Zhu Rongji said at reception to welcome Saturday's start to the Year of the Dragon, among the most auspicious signs in the 12-year zodiac.

China wants to end the 50-year separation with Taiwan and is trying to coax the island into talks on unification, partly by building up its military and threatening to take the island forcibly. But Zhu steered clear of innuendo, and his remarks kept to the holiday's convivial family spirit.

With President Jiang Zemin and the five other members of the ruling communist Party's inner circle present, Zhu said China wants peaceful reunification under an autonomy formula already used to recover Hong Kong and Macau.

"After Hong Kong and Macau returned to the motherland, the sacred mission to resolve the Taiwan issue and completely reunite the motherland has become even more prominent for all the Chinese people," Zhu said.

Jiang is expected to deliver a national holiday address on state television Friday night — while most Chinese gather with family at home to feast and watch a gala of song, dance and comedy on China Central Television, the ancient holiday's newest tradition.

Stalled in Beijing, usually jammed with shoppers and travelers rushing home on Lunar New Year's Eve, were eerily quiet Friday. The government has declared a five-day holiday starting Saturday, and many people took off a day early.

"Usually people go to work for a half-day on the 30th," taxi driver Wang Feixing said, using the date from the traditional farmers' calendar for Lunar New Year's Eve. "But most offices let people go yesterday. So many Beijing industries are in a slump, going to work is no better than staying home."

Boy kills his father's assassin in Pak court

ISLAMABAD, Feb 4: An 11-year old Pakistani boy shot dead the alleged assassin of his father and brother inside a court building as police brought him there for trial, reports said today, says AFP.

Two policemen escorting the prisoner were also injured when Shah Hussain opened fire inside the Sessions Court building in the northwestern city of Peshawar on Thursday, The News daily reported.

The slain prisoner was alleged to have assassinated the boy's father and brother in an old feud, the report said, without giving details.

Peshawar is capital of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, home to ethnic Pashtuns. Blood feuds and revenge killings are endemic in the region, which borders on Afghanistan.

"He came hurling abuse and curses on his prey," and fired half a dozen shots at the alleged murderer, Niaz Mohammad, killing him on the spot, the paper quoted an eyewitness as saying.

The boy then squatted and started crying and was taken into custody by the police, the report said.

Police said Hussain used a 30 bore pistol which he was hiding under a sheet wrapped around his body.

"He seemed to be well-tutored and taught for the task," the report quoted a police officer who questioned the boy after the incident as saying.

Police believe the boy's mother was with him at the time of the shooting but she disappeared immediately, the report said.

"My relatives do not know about this," Hussain told reporters at a police station, according to the newspaper.

He has been kept in a small cell at the police station where he received praise from policemen for his "bravery," the report said.

The boy said his father had been killed 10 years ago and that his brother was murdered last year.

Kumaratunga stays home on Independence Day

COLOMBO, Feb 4: Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga stayed home today as the country marked its 52nd independence anniversary amid tight security and calls for an end to the ethnic war that has scarred the nation for over 16 years, reports Reuters.

The state media had reported on Thursday that Kumaratunga, who escaped an assassination attempt in December in which she lost an eye, was "indisposed" and would rest for a few days.

Kumaratunga, who was to unfurl the national flag and address the nation from the parliament complex, did not take part in the celebrations because she was unwell, officials said on Friday.

Parliament speaker KB Ratnayake filled in for her.

Thousands of soldiers and police patrolled the capital Colombo and new road blocks and check points were thrown up overnight as security forces shut roads around the parliament.

Celebrations were low-key as security concerns mounted after bombs exploded in three buses on Thursday, wounding about 33 people, at least 10 of them seriously. One of the blasts was in a Colombo suburb and another close to the capital.

Kumaratunga in a message issued by the government called upon Sri Lankans to join hands to find peace.

"I appeal to you all to first join together abandoning all narrow attitudes, differences and all such division so that we can achieve that most necessary and urgent goal of peace before we attain our other objectives," she said.

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Sri Lanka has been wracked by an ethnic war since 1983 in which Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are fighting government troops for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in the country's north and east.

Kumaratunga, who escaped the assassination attempt days before she won a second six-year term in presidential elections in December, said the government had taken concrete steps to improve Sri Lankans' lives in the past five years.

The government is finalising a new constitution in consultation with other political parties that aims to give more powers to regions, including one administered by Tamils, in an attempt to partly meet the LTTE demand for a separate homeland.

Kumaratunga plans to take the draft to the rebels before presenting it to parliament.

Nepal's Education Minister quits

KATHMANDU, Feb 4: Nepal's Education Minister Yog Prasad Upadhyaya said today he had resigned from the government, the second minister to quit the eight-month-old Nepali cabinet in one week, reports Reuters.

Last Friday, Finance Minister Mahesh Acharya stepped down over differences with Bhattarai over the appointment of the central bank governor.

"I have resigned to make way for younger generation leaders," the 73-year-old Upadhyaya told Reuters.

There was no immediate comment from Bhattarai on Upadhyaya's resignation but the Nepali daily Kantipur said Upadhyaya had quit in protest after a younger party leader was appointed deputy prime minister.

Upadhyaya, the most senior member of Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai's cabinet, tendered his resignation on Thursday.

Bhattarai appointed Ram Chandra Poudel, 55, as deputy prime minister on Tuesday but a move to defuse a growing crisis created by Acharya's resignation.

Upadhyaya said he bore no grudges over Poudel's appointment. "It is time that younger people take over," he said.

Bhattarai, who became Prime Minister in May last year, has been criticised by his own Nepali Congress party for what it says is his failure to implement economic development projects.

Four killed in Kashmir violence

SRINAGAR, India, Feb 4: Two Indian border guards and two Muslim militants were killed today in separate incidents in the troubled Indian state of Kashmir, police said, reports AFP.

A police spokesman said two members of India's Border Security Force died in the state summer capital Srinagar when suspected rebels triggered an explosive device.

Initial reports suggest that militants detonated a bomb when border guards were patrolling the area. The spokesman said "But it could also be a hand grenade tossed at the patrol."

The 10.00 am (0430 GMT) blast was heard around a two kilometre (1.2-mile) radius, residents said, adding that police had cordoned off the area to track down the attackers.

The police spokesman also said two Muslim separatist rebels died early Friday after a night-long gunbattle with security forces in town of Chadoora about 25 kilometres (15 miles) from Srinagar.

Muslim separatists have been waging a 10-year insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir. The violence has claimed more than 25,000 lives

BRIEFLY

Sudanese cargo plane crashes: A Sudanese cargo plane crashed into Lake Victoria in northern Tanzania on Thursday evening, but all five people on board survived, police and television reports said Thursday, AFP reports from Dar Es Salaam.

Mwanza regional police commander Elia Kihengu told the independent ITV that the plane plunged into the lake about 500 metres away from the runway at Mwanza airport. The five survivors were rescued by fishermen, he added.

3 shot dead in Kosovo violence: Three ethnic Albanians were shot dead in the northern Kosovo city of Mitrovica on Thursday night, the NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping force said, Reuters reports from Pristina.

The peacekeepers also reported two grenade attacks on Serb cafes in the city, wounding a total of around 20 people. The violence came the day after a rocket attack on a United Nations bus in the Mitrovica region which killed two Serbs and wounded three, heightening tensions between Kosovo's ethnic Albanian majority and the Serb minority.

Measles epidemic in Afghanistan: A measles epidemic that broke out in northern Afghanistan a month ago has killed about 100 people, the United Nations said Friday, AP reports from Islamabad.

The outbreak was first reported around the Darra Souf district, about 230 kilometres northwest of the capital Kabul, and has since spread to neighbouring areas, according to the UN office for Afghanistan.

Train-bus collision kills 13: At least 13 people were killed in a collision between a passenger train and a city minibus at a crossing in West Java, the official Antara news agency reported Friday, AP reports from Jakarta.

Among the deaths in the Thursday accident was Suhra, 32, a guard at the crossing in Karawang regency, about 50 kilometres east of Jakarta, where the Jakarta-bound train slammed into the minibus with 20 people on board.

Quake shakes Taiwan: A strong earthquake jolted southeast Taiwan early Friday, seismologists said. No damage or injuries were immediately reported, AP reports from Taipei.

The 5.2-magnitude tremor's epicentre was 7.5 kilometres northeast of Taifung, a coastal city about 120 miles south of the capital, Taipei, the Central Weather Bureau said.

Authorities ordered closure of Karachi Airport, witness says

KARACHI, Feb 4: Acting on orders from "the top," Pakistan authorities ordered the Karachi airport closed last Oct. 12 in a bid to prevent the return of the country's army chief, a witness testified Friday at the trial of ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, reports AP.

The attempt to block the plane failed, and army chief Gen. Pervez Musharraf overthrew Sharif after his aircraft landed with only a few minutes of fuel remaining. Sharif has been charged with hijacking, attempted murder, kidnapping and terrorism, and could face the death penalty or life in

prison if convicted.

In testimony Friday, Bashir Ahmed Memon, the superintendent of police in Karachi, said he was summoned to the airport on the evening of Oct. 12, and was told to bring armored personnel carriers with him.

When he arrived at the airport's VIP lounge, he encountered Rana Maqbul Ahmed, the police chief for the southern province Sindh, and Ghaus Ali Shah, the acting chief minister of the province.

The two men said the airport was being closed, and the other policemen present should be prepared to take control of the airport, Memon testified.

"When one policeman asked why this was being done, Ahmed said it was 'an order from the top, and we have to stop the plane which is carrying the army chief,'" according to Memon's testimony.

But Memon said army officers were already arriving by this time, and he and other police officers left the airport. The army officers took control of the airport and the general's plane was given permission to land.

Sharif has pleaded innocent to all the charges and has demanded the restoration of his elected civilian government. Musharraf has said he intends to restore democracy after he cleans up corruption in the government, but he has declined to set a timetable.

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