

Musharraf calls for E Timor-like referendum on Kashmir

ISLAMABAD, Feb 5: Pakistan today observed a day of solidarity with a decade-old Muslim separatist campaign in Indian Kashmir, with military ruler General Pervez Musharraf calling for an East Timor-like referendum for the disputed territory, reports AFP.

Rallies, processions and demonstrations were organised by political parties and militant groups fighting in Kashmir in major cities in Pakistan and the Islamabad-controlled northern third of Kashmir to mark the day, an annual event since 1990.

The 52-year row over Kashmir, which has caused two wars between Pakistan and India since their independence in 1947, remains a flashpoint between the newly nuclear-armed countries.

India, which holds two-thirds of the disputed territory, accuses Pakistan of fomenting the unrest in its zone, which has claimed more than 25,000 lives since 1989. Islamabad says the movement is indigenous but offers moral and diplomatic support.

"The hearts of people of Pakistan beat in unison with their brethren waging a freedom struggle in Indian-occupied Kashmir," Musharraf said.

He was speaking at Muzaffarabad in Pakistani Kashmir at a camp housing refugees from Indian Kashmir.

"We pray to Almighty Allah

to crown the freedom struggle in Kashmir with success and deliver the people from Indian brutalities," he said.

Stressing that Kashmir remains on the agenda of the United Nations since it passed resolutions in 1948-49 calling for a plebiscite in the disputed territory, Musharraf asked India to negotiate a settlement.

Musharraf asked India to



Maulana Masood Azhar, a leading Pakistani Islamic cleric, addresses a press conference in Karachi on Friday. Azhar, who was freed from an Indian jail to end a hijacking last month, launched a new movement to unite mujahideen fighters in Kashmir.

— AFP photo

come to the negotiating table to resolve the core dispute maintaining tension in the region.

"Kashmir is the root cause of tensions and all other matters are only small irritants," he said.

Musharraf called on the international community to help resolve the dispute to usher in an era of peace in the region.

If a UN-sponsored referen-

dum could be held in East Timor, one could also take place in Kashmir, he said. East Timor in a UN ballot last year overwhelmingly voted for independence from Indonesia.

Musharraf advised Kashmiri groups to unite on a single platform to strengthen their 'freedom' struggle.

He announced special grants totalling 700 million rupees (around 14 million dollars) for development and poverty alleviation in Azad, or Free Kashmir, the official name for the Pakistani zone.

The solidarity day started with special prayers in mosques for the success of the Kashmiris' 'liberation struggle.' Later traffic came to a standstill for a minute of silence and prayers for the 'martyrs' in Kashmir.

With the day declared a holiday by the government, markets and government and private establishments remained shut.

Musharraf, senior judges and government employees have donated a portion of their salaries for Kashmiris affected by the jihad, or holy war, in Kashmir.

In Islamabad, thousands rallied under the banner of the guerrilla group Lashkar-i-Taiba, whose fighters are active in Indian Kashmir. A pro-Kashmir walk was separately staged by other parties.

Wahid repeats demand for Wiranto to quit

JAKARTA, Feb 5: Indonesian President Abdurrahman repeated his demand for former armed forces chief General Wiranto, blamed by a domestic rights inquiry for violence in East Timor, to resign as security minister, a report said today, reports AFP.

"I asked him to resign," Wahid was shown saying by the state TVRI channel in Berlin on Friday during an extended European tour.

"If he doesn't want to (step down), the rule for all ministers will apply, that if they stand trial, they must be suspended, if they are found guilty, they must resign."

But the president appeared to agree with a statement made by Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono in Jakarta on Friday, who said he and Wiranto would wait until the president returned on February 13 to resolve the standoff.

"If (he) still doesn't resign, I will ask him to resign," Wahid said, speaking in Indonesian, when questioned by Indonesian journalists about Sudarsono's statement, which was made in the defence ministry here.

Wahid has twice asked Wiranto to relinquish his cabinet post in the past week, following the publication of the findings of KPP-HAM, a state-backed inquiry into post-referendum violence in East Timor last year.

Indian kills himself in support of Jayalalitha

MADRAS, India, Feb 5: A 38-year-old man immolated himself in southern India to protest against the conviction of a popular woman politician in a corruption case, officials said Saturday, reports AFP.

R. Aludhin set himself on fire at his home at Tirupur town in the southern state of Tamil Nadu on Friday and succumbed to his injuries in a hospital, a police spokesman said here.

The man was a member of the AIADMK party of Jayalalitha Jayaram, who was sentenced Wednesday by a court to one year of hard labour in prison for corruption.

Alaudhin reportedly told police he was depressed by Jayalalitha's conviction.

"He poured kerosene on his clothes and set them on fire," the spokesman said. "He ran out of the house screaming in pain. He said before dying that he could not bear to see Jayalalitha in jail."

It was the second reported case of suicide in support of Jayalalitha, a former movie star, since Thursday when a 30-year-old man burned himself to death at Tamil Nadu's Villupuram district.



A dragon dancer teases the crowd during a Chinese New Year parade in Wanchai district yesterday. Saturday was the first day of the Chinese New Year of the Dragon, the beginning of the 12-year-cycle in the Chinese calendar.

— AFP photo

Crackdown on Falungong group in Tiananmen Square Hundreds detained

BEIJING, Feb 5: Chinese police today detained hundreds and possibly thousands of members of the banned Falungong group, using kicks and punches to break up a string of peaceful Lunar New Year protests in Tiananmen Square, reports AFP.

The huge square in central Beijing was crawling all day with police clutching walkie-talkies who pounced on anyone starting to meditate -- a common Falungong sign of protest.

Police screamed at tourists to stay away from their activities and demanded they hand over any film of the arrests, which included violent kicking, punching and jostling.

Foreign press photographers were threatened with arrest if they did not leave the square immediately.

The protests began on Friday, with a flurry of activity at about midnight as police jumped on a group of about 50 Falungong members unfurling a banner while fireworks lit up the sky to welcome the new year.

"A friend of mine was arrested last night at about 1:55 a.m., she called me on her cellular phone and told me she was detained with between 2,000 and 3,000 (others)," Hannah Li, a Falungong member, told AFP.

Li said her friend, whom she identified as a Chinese-American,

can, was taken early Saturday to the Xiao Tangshan detention centre in northern Beijing. Li said her friend hoped to remain in custody as long as possible to document the treatment of the followers.

She refused to further identify the woman and believed police had yet to discover her cellular phone.

The protest was the biggest by the Falungong since mid-October when thousands were rounded up for protesting government legislation aimed at stifling the group.

"We want to tell the government that Falungong is not an evil sect and that followers should be allowed to do their morning exercises freely," she said.

An official at the detention centre confirmed Falungong followers were being held there, but refused to reveal how many.

"If they are Falungong followers, then you don't need to ask about them," she said.

Frank Lu, head of the Hong Kong-based Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China, said he had been informed that at least 300 Falungong followers had been rounded up Friday and early Saturday, including some Westerners.

Li said dozens of Falungong practitioners from the United States, Australia and Hong

Kong had come to Beijing during the Lunar New Year festival to protest the ban on the mystical group.

At least one US passport holder, Zuo Yan, was detained at Beijing Airport and was believed to have been expelled, Li said.

Li said followers had been detained all day Friday and the Falungong would continue to protest.

Saturday morning police vans criss-crossed Tiananmen Square, stopping to detain anyone in a meditation stance or sitting in the lotus position.

At least 25 members of the group were taken away over that period. Fewer followers were seen being detained in the afternoon although a heavy police presence remained.

"You can take any pictures that you want, even the soldiers, but you can't take pictures of those people exercising," a policeman told a US tour.

Chinese authorities admit that more than 35,000 members of the banned group were detained while attempting to make similar protests between July and mid-November, after Falungong was outlawed.

Scores of alleged 'core leaders' of the group have been tried and sentenced to up to 18 years imprisonment for 'using an evil sect to sabotage the implementation of the law'.

Senate polls Hillary to announce candidacy today

NEW YORK, Feb 5: Hillary Clinton is scheduled to officially announce her much-anticipated and unprecedented candidacy for the Senate on Sunday at a huge campaign event outside New York City, reports AFP.

Although she settled all doubts about her candidacy in late December by announcing, "Yes, I intend to run," she has waited to carefully choose when and how she would formally announce.

About 500 Democratic leaders and friends have been invited to a college in Purchase, about 60 kilometers (40 miles) north of New York.

There, in front of a bank of cameras and with her husband and daughter at her side, Hillary Clinton will ask the people of the state of New York to let her represent them, becoming the first presidential spouse to run for elective office.

New Austrian govt takes office amid protests

VIENNA, Feb 5: Facing protests and international isolation for allying with a party identified with Nazi sympathies, Austria's new chancellor says there is no chance of a new Hitler emerging in Europe's heart, reports AP.

Wolfgang Schuessel's coalition government took office against a backdrop of egg-throwing protests in the capital, forcing the new ministers to leave the swearing-in ceremony through an underground tunnel.

President Thomas Klestil swore in the new center-right coalition of Schuessel's Austrian People's Party and Joerg Haider's far-right wing Freedom Party on Friday, and appealed to the world to give the new government a chance to fulfill its promises to govern under European standards of democracy and human rights.

"There is no Hitler on the rise," Schuessel told a nationwide television audience, refer-

ring to allegations against his partner Haider.

As the ministers were taking their oaths on Friday, some 5,000 protesters massed outside the presidential offices, pelting police with eggs and paint.

One protester, Wilhelm Popovic, said he was showing his opposition "in the name of my father," whom he said spent seven years in a Nazi concentration camp "because of policies like this."

Protesters roamed downtown Vienna on Friday evening, briefly taking over the Social Affairs Ministry and destroying several police cars.

Late Friday, police used water cannon and tear gas to disperse a group of demonstrators in front of the Freedom Party office on Kaerntner Strasse, the capital's main street and a tourist center lined with expensive boutiques.

More than 30 police were injured in the day-long clashes

with protesters. Smaller protests took place in Linz, Graz and Innsbruck.

Israel did not even wait for the government to be sworn in to recall its ambassador. And one by one, the 14 nations sharing European Union membership with Austria started reducing diplomatic ties, canceling contracts and official visits and freezing high-level contacts.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said Ambassador Kathryn Walt-Hall would leave for Washington to report and then return to Vienna to monitor the political crisis. The State Department said the action did not amount to a recall.

Klestil had repeatedly warned that Freedom Party participation in government would produce a fierce reaction because of Haider's anti-foreigner stand, opposition to European Union expansion and past praise of Nazi policies.

Clinton's visit to Pakistan uncertain

WASHINGTON, Feb 5: The White House stated Friday it has yet to make a decision on whether President Bill Clinton will visit Pakistan during an upcoming tour of South Asia, but analysts here said such a stopover would run counter to current US policy, reports AFP.

"Any decision on potential travel to Pakistan will be made in the light of if the president believes a trip would further US interests in the region," White House spokesman Mike Hammer told AFP.

Clinton is due to arrive in New Delhi on March 20 and stay in India for five days, before making a one-day visit to Bangladesh.

But a stopover in Pakistan, now headed by General Pervez Musharraf who seized power in a military coup after the ouster of prime minister Nawaz Sharif's government in October, is uncertain.

While pushing for a US visit, Musharraf has not indicated a readiness to cede his military rule. "The whole population has accepted me and my government," he told the Washington Post in an interview published Friday.

"General Musharraf is aware relations between our two countries cannot return to normal until there is a return to civilian rule," Hammer said.

Washington has been pressing the military rulers to set a time table for a return to civilian rule, curb regional terrorism, and use its influence with the Taliban militia to expel suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden.

A Clinton visit, therefore,

17 killed in Colombia violence

BOGOTA, Feb 5: At least 17 people died Friday in attacks by leftist and right-wing gunmen in Colombia, including a 6-year-old boy killed by a car bomb detonated by suspected Marxist rebels, reports Reuters.

The killings were a reminder of how much civilians are in the cross-fire of a protracted civil conflict that has taken 35,000 lives and forced more than 1 million people to flee their homes in the last decade.

Police said the worst bloodshed occurred in a rural area of northwest Antioquia province where marauding members of a right-wing paramilitary group gunned down 11 peasant farm workers with automatic assault rifles.

Three of the victims' bodies were found floating in a river late Friday. The motive for the killings was unknown, according to Ivan Dario Posada, who heads the municipality in which they occurred.

EgyptAir pilot seeks refuge in Britain

CAIRO, Feb 5: An EgyptAir pilot is seeking political asylum in Britain, claiming he has information on the fate of EgyptAir Flight 990 which crashed into the Atlantic last year killing 217, officials said today, reports AFP.

EgyptAir chairman Mohammed Fahim Rayyan said Hamdi Hanafi Taha, 49, requested asylum Friday, but insisted he "does not have the slightest connection to or knowledge of the accident," in a press statement.

A British Home Office spokesman confirmed that an Egyptian national "has sought entry to the UK" at Heathrow airport, without specifying the reasons for his request.

"His application is currently being considered by the immigration service," the spokesman said.

Taha had flown EgyptAir Flight 779 into London earlier Friday and called air traffic control while other pilots were out of the cockpit to ask for police to pick him up at Heathrow because he had information about October's air disaster, fellow EgyptAir pilot Mohammed Salama told reporters.

"We were surprised when the British police accompanied him. We didn't know what was going on," said Salama, who flew EgyptAir's return flight from London.

A British Civil Aviation Authority official added that the pilot of a flight coming from Cairo "asked to speak to Heathrow staff. We forwarded that request."

Salama told reporters on arrival at Cairo airport in the

early hours of Saturday that he heard British police saying Taha had claimed to have "information about the disaster."

An EgyptAir press statement also said Taha was "claiming he had information" about the crash whose causes have still not been determined by investigators.

Taha, an Airbus 600 pilot, had "some problems with EgyptAir and certain financial and employment demands," the Egypt's state-run MENA news agency quoted an official with EgyptAir's pilots' association it did not name as saying.

DPRK accuses ROK of developing ballistic missiles

SEOUL, Feb 5: North Korea accused South Korea of developing long-range ballistic missiles under the disguise of a satellite-launching programme, reports AP.

South Korea announced in December that it will have its own satellite launching station by 2005. It says the programme is purely commercial and has no military purpose.

In a dispatch late Friday, the isolated communist state's Korea Central News Agency said the South's rocket programme is actually designed to build intercontinental ballistic missiles.

"We will immediately and unhesitatingly take a strong counter measures against the South Korean authorities' 'satellite launch programme' when it is confirmed," KCNA said.

Kuwaiti liberals call for political reform

KUWAIT CITY, Feb 5: A liberal pressure group in Kuwait has called for political reform to ensure the success of an economic shakeup in the oil-rich emirate, newspapers said Saturday, reports AFP.

"The main posts in the cabinet should not remain monopolised and immune to political constitutional questioning," the Kuwait Democratic Forum (KDF) said in a statement carried by Al-Qabas.

"The first step to reform the economy, education, administration and others, is immediate fundamental political reform, headed by that of the executive authority," the group said.

Liberals in Kuwait have long called for political reform split-

ting the dual role of crown prince and prime minister.

As crown prince, Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah al-Sabah can not be questioned in the National Assembly, a situation many MPs say contributes to a lack of government accountability.

The prince, who opposes cuts in government subsidies and welfare provision, has been a target of criticism from liberal MPs and the merchant class who accuse him of slowing the economy.

The KDF charged Kuwait was in a "state of stagnation and paralysis" and that a new cabinet was needed to take control of the decision-making process of government.

Will your sign look as new after 5 years?



Only if your sign maker has used proper material. Here is a check list for you

✓ VINYL

There are many types of vinyl. For backlit signs, one has to use translucent vinyls so that the light passes evenly making the entire sign bright and clear.

The colours should also be guaranteed for outdoor life upto 5 years. Insist on seeing the vinyl manufacturer's warranty.

✓ POLYCARBONATE SHEETS & FLEX-FACES

These material should be guaranteed for UV (ultra violet ray) protection. Without UV protection, the face will become yellow and brittle. Good quality products have this

protection. It doesn't cost more.

So insist that your supplier shows you proof of UV protection (manufacturer's certification).

✓ FLEXFACE SIGNS

Good flexface signs need proper tensioning systems to ensure that the sign is stretched correctly and evenly. Proper

tensioning systems allow you to easily open the signs for maintenance and cleaning. You will have people offer you flex signs at a slightly cheaper rate, but without the tensioning system. They merely screw on or rivet the flexface to the iron frame, making it difficult to open and refix the sign with proper tension.

Typical light fittings:

✓ LIGHTBOXES

If your sign face is to remain bright for 5 years, your lightbox should also be upto the mark. There has to be sufficient tube lights, correctly

spaced from each other. The box has to be strong with proper rust protection and long lasting paint.

At Signage, we use the finest material imported directly from manufacturers in the USA, Germany, Switzerland, the UK and other countries. All our material are backed by warranty. We offer you all this at no extra cost. For best value, come and see us. Come to the future.

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BRIEFLY

Endeavour set to fly Feb 11:

The US space agency will make a new attempt to launch the space shuttle Endeavour on February 11 after its scheduled mission was postponed this week, a NASA official announced, AFP reports from Washington.

Liftoff is now scheduled for 12:30 pm local time (2330 BST), with a launch window of two hours and 10 minutes, said Bruce Buckingham, a spokesman for the Kennedy Space Centre in Cape Canaveral, Florida. During the delay, the agency will replace an on-board computer that malfunctioned Monday, prompting flight controllers to scrap the mission.

2-seater plane crashes in Malaysia: A two-seater aircraft crashed into the sea on Saturday during a rehearsal for a show to promote tourism in the western Malaysian state of Perak, the national news agency reported, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

The pilots, from private flying clubs, were rescued from the sea and sent to a hospital for treatment of unspecified injuries, Bernama news agency said. The proposed show is aimed at encouraging aerial sight-seeing for tourists who visit the popular offshore destinations in the state.