

# Russian troops tighten grip on Grozny, hunt for rebels

NAZRAN, Russia, Feb 6: Russian troops tightened their hold over the Chechen capital Grozny and combed country to the southwest of the city for rebel fighters today, reports Reuters.

A senior Russian commander said on Saturday the focus of the military campaign, now into its fifth month, would switch to the rebels' mountain strongholds in southern Chechnya, where he said about 7,000 fighters were now estimated to be hiding.

But Valery Manilov, first deputy chief of the General Staff, also said about 1,000 guerrillas were still lying low in Grozny and said Moscow could not yet claim full control of the city.

Russia's NTV television showed footage of fighters heading through snowbound forests onto higher ground. NTV said some of the fighters spoke lan-

guages other than Chechen, highlighting the role of foreign mercenaries in the war.

Reuters Television showed rare footage of an operation performed last Monday night on Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev, Russia's most wanted man, in the town of Alkhan-Kala shortly after he lost his right foot escaping from Grozny.

The bearded, shaven-headed Basayev, who has spearheaded Chechen resistance to Russia's offensive, had his foot amputated while under a local anaesthetic. He lay impassively as the doctors laboured with only the most primitive of implements.

The chief doctor, Khasan Baiyev, told Reuters in Nazran in the neighbouring Russian region of Ingushetia on Saturday that Basayev had shown considerable courage leading his

men across the minefields to Alkhan-Kala.

Baiyev, who amputated Basayev's leg, denied reports that Basayev had lost an eye.

Defence Minister Igor Sergeev said the rebels had lost as many as 1,500 men trying to escape the Russian encirclement of Grozny over the past few days.

Civilian refugees fleeing adjacent areas said Russian troops had opened fire on them despite promising a safe corridor.

Dozens of the refugees, including children, were being treated in hospitals in Ingushetia at the weekend.

They included two girls aged nine and six with badly burned faces and arms who a relative said had fallen in the line of fire in the village of Katy-Yurt.

Katy-Yurt, about 30 km (20 miles) southwest of Grozny, was

the scene of renewed fighting on Saturday after a large band of rebels staged a surprise attack on Interior Ministry troops.

Three OMON (police commandos) were killed, Tass said.

Grozny itself has fallen largely silent, apart from a few isolated skirmishes between remaining rebels and Russian troops.

"As the task of freeing Grozny from bandit groups is carried out, it allows us to re-group forces in the southern direction to complete the routing and liquidation of bandit groups in the Argun Gorge and mountainous regions," Manilov said on Saturday.

Tass quoted police in Moscow as saying they had information that more bomb blasts had been planned in the Russian capital in the near future and they were trying to hunt down the suspects.

## Clinton putting pressure on Sinn Fein

LONDON, Feb 6: US President Bill Clinton has told leaders of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), that they will not be issued visas to visit the States unless the IRA makes a move towards disarmament, the British press reported today, reports AFP.

The Northern Ireland peace process is in danger of collapsing over the IRA's failure to begin disarmament which should be completed by May according to the 1998 Good Friday peace accord.

According to the Sunday Times, the Sunday Telegraph and the News of the World, Clinton told Sinn Fein leaders Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness that they would not be issued with visas for their annual visit to New York, to celebrate St. Patrick's Day on March 17 unless there is "substantial progress" on disarmament.

The traditional visit to the United States allows the Sinn Fein leaders to maintain their links with the minds and wallets of the Irish-American community.

In a statement issued in Belfast Saturday, the IRA rejected pressure over its failure to disarm, while reaffirming its support of the Northern Ireland peace process.



Rescue workers carry an injured passenger to an ambulance early yesterday after an international passenger train derailed and crashed at a station in Bruell, near Cologne. At least seven people were killed and 50 others were injured, 18 seriously, in the accident. — AFP photo

## Lankan parties hold meeting on constitution

COLOMBO, Feb 6: Parties of the Sri Lankan ruling People's Alliance (PA) held a series of meetings last week on a new constitution for the country, The Sunday Observer reported today, reports Xinhua.

The parties so far had six meetings, which were "very productive" and consensus has been reached on several key issues including devolution, informed political sources were quoted as saying.

As a result of these talks, the government has been able to accommodate the concerns voiced by some sections without harming the original draft, the sources said.

Areas on which consensus has been reached include the executive presidency, the sources said, adding that the next phase of talks will concentrate on the electoral system.

The government decided last month to present a draft constitution in the parliament in three months to end the protracted ethnic conflicts in the country.

Sri Lanka has been troubled by a long-running war between the government troops and Tamil rebels who have been fighting since 1983 for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the country.

The government has proposed the draft constitution to end the ethnic war by devolving more powers to regional councils, including one in the northeast administered by minority Tamils to partly meet Tamil rebels' demand for independence.

But the draft constitution has been stalled in the parliament for more than three years for want of a two-third majority due to the lack of the United National Party support.

## Blasts near Khatami's office in Tehran: One killed

TEHRAN, Feb 6: Explosions near the offices of President Mohammad Khatami killed one person and wounded five in Tehran Saturday night, state television said, two weeks ahead of Iran's legislative elections.

In a telephone call to AFP in Nicosia, a spokesman for the main armed Iranian opposition group, the People's Mujahadeen, claimed responsibility for attacks on a palace housing the offices of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

The offices of Khamenei and Rafsanjani are in the same area as Khatami's.

State television reported that a 29-year-old printing shop employee was killed by one of the explosions, five people wounded, and the shop itself was seriously damaged.

The neighbourhood, near the thoroughfare of Vali-Asr Street, which used to be called Pahlavi Street after the former shah, was sealed off by the Basijis Islamic volunteer militia and police officers, an AFP correspondent on the scene said.

Police stepped up identity-card checks throughout the Iranian capital.

Witnesses said the explosions targeted the offices of the pro-reform Khatami and Rafsanjani, who heads the powerful state expediency council, which arbitrates legal and theological disputes over legislation passed by parliament.

The palace used by Khamenei in the same neighbourhood, was not affected, other witnesses said.

The Mujahadeen spokesman told AFP that Khatami's offices and residence, in the ousted Shah's marble palace, were hit by mortar shells at 7:30 p.m. Tehran time (2200 BST).

"This operation was carried out by several groups of Mujahadeen fighters in the capital in an operation named 'Tehran Uprising' in memory of people killed and wounded by Revolutionary Guards in July during

the student uprising," the spokesman said.

Security had been increased "to an unprecedented degree" in the past few days, "but the Mujahadeen unit, with the support of the people of Tehran and also some of the staff, were able to enter the forbidden security zone, which is protected by the Revolutionary Guards' 10th division," he said.

The explosions, which occurred at 7:40 p.m. (2210 BST), sowed panic across the neighbourhood, a witness said, adding that at least 25 ambulances, sirens wailing, had rushed to the scene.

The official IRNA news agency said that at least five explosions had occurred, including one that was "especially violent."

The explosions came ahead of February 18 legislative elections that pit the country's conservatives, who dominate the parliament, against supporters of reforms promoted by Khatami.

the student uprising," the spokesman said.

Security had been increased "to an unprecedented degree" in the past few days, "but the Mujahadeen unit, with the support of the people of Tehran and also some of the staff, were able to enter the forbidden security zone, which is protected by the Revolutionary Guards' 10th division," he said.

The explosions, which occurred at 7:40 p.m. (2210 BST), sowed panic across the neighbourhood, a witness said, adding that at least 25 ambulances, sirens wailing, had rushed to the scene.

The official IRNA news agency said that at least five explosions had occurred, including one that was "especially violent."

The explosions came ahead of February 18 legislative elections that pit the country's conservatives, who dominate the parliament, against supporters of reforms promoted by Khatami.

## Seven killed as train crashes in Germany

BRUEHL, Germany, Feb 6: At least seven people were killed and many injured, when an international passenger train derailed and crashed at a station near the western German city of Cologne early today, police said, reports AFP.

Rescuers estimated the number of critically injured at between 20 and 50 out of a total of some 105 hurt, said the secretary of state at the regional interior ministry for North Rhine Westphalia Wolfgang Rittow.

The accident happened just after midnight as the overnight train from Amsterdam to Basle, Switzerland was entering the suburban Bruell station, about 15 km from Cologne.

The train's engine and its first carriage left the tracks, plunging into a ditch before crashing into a house by the side of the tracks, police said.

An elderly couple living in the house were shaken but unharmed, they added.

Another carriage slammed into a metal beam in the station.

The head of German rail operators Deutsche Bahn, Hertzmut Mehdorn, said during an inspection of the site that "from a purely visual point of view," it was possible that the train had been travelling too fast as it approached the station.

The speed limit for that stretch of track was 40 km per hour, said Deutsche Bahn.

The train was carrying around 300 passengers, including British, Dutch and Japanese nationals, when it crashed, Rittow said.

Rescue services were quickly mobilised, including 30 ambulances, and four helicopters were used to ferry the injured to a neighbouring hospital.

But some passengers were trapped in the mangled wreckage for three hours before rescuers could release them in what Mehdorn described as a "desolate scene."

It was the worst German rail crash since 101 were killed in a high-speed train accident in the northern town of Eschede, on June 3, 1998.

## Anti-Haider protests continue

VIENNA, Feb 6: Austrian riot police stopped hundreds of demonstrators from marching on the headquarters of the far-right Freedom Party overnight after violent protests on Saturday against the party's inclusion in a new coalition government, reports AFP.

Police barred hundreds of protesters from the pedestrian road leading to the party building in the centre of town after minor scuffles.

Police armoured cars and water canons were on stand-by.

On Saturday, the second day of protests, a group of marchers hurled eggs and bottles at police protecting the Vienna headquarters of Austria's conservative People's Party, coalition partners of the Freedom Party.

Their brief attack contrasted with the attitude of the main body of some 2,000 protesters who gathered peacefully in the city to show their disapproval of Austria's new conservative and far-right government.

The head of the march was marked by banners proclaiming non-violent opposition. One group of militants distributed leaflets in the crowd warning them that further violence would damage their cause.

In violence during protests Friday 43 police officers and 13 protesters were hurt.

Most of the protesters were young left-wingers and as well as shouting slogans condemning Joerg Haider's Freedom Party, which won government posts for the first time Friday, the crowds attacked privatisation and demanded "jobs for all."

Many Viennese householders hung anti-Haider banners from their balconies, while clients in cafes left their tables to swell the crowd and motorists sounded their horns in support of the protest.

## Pakistan blames India for bomb blast

KARACHI, Feb 6: Pakistan's interior minister today blamed Indian intelligence agents for a bomb blast that killed seven passengers on a train, reports AFP.

The blast destroyed a train carriage at a railway station in Hyderabad, in southern Sindh province, on Saturday, killing four people and injuring 15.

Another three died in hospital on Sunday, a police official said.

Islamabad often blames India's intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, for such blasts.

"The hints are that Indian RAW is involved in the recent bomb blast, particularly because it coincided with Kashmir day," Interior Minister Moeenuddin Haider told reporters here.

He said no arrests had yet been made for the bombing.

A police official in Hyderabad said a railway official based at the station was suspended Sunday.

Pakistan marked Kashmir Solidarity Day on Saturday, with thousands of people across the country demonstrating in support of the Kashmiri separatist cause in what has become an annual event since 1990.

Pakistan and India have fought two of their three wars since 1947 over the disputed Himalayan state.

A second bomb exploded on Saturday in a market in Jhang, in central Punjab, killing one person and injuring two others.

Death toll rises to 7

KARACHI, Feb 6: Pakistan's interior minister today blamed Indian intelligence agents for a bomb blast that killed seven passengers on a train, reports AFP.

The blast destroyed a train carriage at a railway station in Hyderabad, in southern Sindh province, on Saturday, killing four people and injuring 15.

Another three died in hospital on Sunday, a police official said.

Islamabad often blames India's intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, for such blasts.

"The hints are that Indian RAW is involved in the recent bomb blast, particularly because it coincided with Kashmir day," Interior Minister Moeenuddin Haider told reporters here.

He said no arrests had yet been made for the bombing.

A police official in Hyderabad said a railway official based at the station was suspended Sunday.

Pakistan marked Kashmir Solidarity Day on Saturday, with thousands of people across the country demonstrating in support of the Kashmiri separatist cause in what has become an annual event since 1990.

Pakistan and India have fought two of their three wars since 1947 over the disputed Himalayan state.

A second bomb exploded on Saturday in a market in Jhang, in central Punjab, killing one person and injuring two others.

## Separatist group warns against voting in India

GUWAHATI, India Feb 6: A tribal separatist group in the northeastern India state of Manipur today warned people against voting in upcoming local elections, reports AFP.

The outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) said in a statement that it would take "punitive actions, including imposition of collective fine, on villages taking part in the poll process."

"We will be enforcing the boycott (call) strictly," it said.

The NSCN has been campaigning for five decades to secede Nagaland, a small Christian-majority state bordering Burma. The NSCN is also active in adjoining Manipur.

The NSCN had imposed "collective fines" on 20 villages of Manipur where residents cast their votes during Indian parliamentary elections last year, a police official told AFP.

Manipur police officials said they had urged New Delhi to send reinforcements of paramilitary forces to the state to prevent violence during the elections to the Manipur assembly on February 12.

Long-running ethnic and separatist conflicts have claimed thousands of lives in India's oil-rich far-east in the past five decades. The NSCN is also the oldest of all insurgent groups in India.

Elections are due in four Indian states, including Manipur, this month.

## Firecrackers kill one, injure 119 in China

BEIJING, Feb 6: A 13-year-old boy was killed and at least 119 others were hospitalised in firecracker accidents during Lunar New Year celebrations in Beijing and Shanghai, the official press reported today, reports AFP.

The boy, surnamed Chen, was killed Friday night in Shanghai by a "shoddy" firecracker that exploded around his head while he was playing with his cousin, the Liberation daily said.

The explosive measured three centimetres (1.2 inches) in diameter and was 40 centimetres long.

Nineteen others between the ages of three and 69 were admitted to a single hospital in Shanghai the same night, suffering from burns to the eyes, face, and hands, the newspaper added.

In Beijing, more than 100 people were injured in similar accidents during festivities to welcome the Year of the Dragon, according to the Beijing Evening News, which surveyed 28 hospitals.

At least 30 of them were treated at the Tongren hospital, which specialises in eye injuries.

The newspaper did not say whether the explosions happened in the capital city, where fireworks have been banned since the mid-1990s.



Ex-cricketer Imran Khan (L), leader of the Tehreek-i-Insaf (Movement for Justice) party, addresses a public rally in Lahore on Friday to show solidarity with the "freedom struggle" in Indian-held Kashmir. — AFP photo

## China blasts US missile defence plan

MUNICH, Germany, Feb 6: China's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Guangya launched a verbal attack today on the US government for its plans to develop a national system of anti-missile defence, saying this could provoke a new arms race, reports AFP.

Wang was addressing a high-powered informal defence and security forum in Munich also attended by US Defence Secretary William Cohen, who Saturday strongly defended the anti-missile system as necessary to counter a threat of attack from "rogue states."

The Chinese minister made no direct mention of the United States, but his reference to a "certain country" was perfectly clear in the context.

Wang said: "In an attempt to seek absolute security for itself, a certain country is stepping up its research, development and deployment of sophisticated anti-missile systems, even at the expense of violating the in-

ternational legal obligations to which it has committed itself.

"This move will undoubtedly inflict severe damages on global strategic balance and stability, undermine the international security environment, make it difficult to carry on the inter-

**Al Gore wins Delaware primary**

WILMINGTON, Delaware, Feb 6: Vice President Al Gore won the Delaware presidential primary Saturday, outdistancing Bill Bradley in an election neglected by the Democratic campaigners and most voters, reports AP.

Gore's victory was projected on the basis of interviews by Voter News Service as people left the polling precincts. Those interviews suggested a wide preference for Gore over Bradley.

national non-proliferation regime and may even trigger a new round of arms race, to the detriment of its (the US) own security at the end of the day."

In a following debate, the Chinese vice-minister said that the US plan was a "heavy blow" for the ABM (anti-ballistic missile) treaty between Russia and the United States, and that if this treaty were undermined it would have "serious implications" for other disarmament agreements.

Cohen had told the same conference the previous day that the United States was developing a national anti-missile defence system to defend itself against a threat of long-range missile attack from such "rogue states" as North Korea, Iran, Iraq and Libya.

Cohen said both the United States and Europe faced such a threat, but that President Bill Clinton had not yet taken the final decision to deploy the system.

## I'm not retiring from catwalk, says Naomi

SYDNEY, Feb 6: Supermodel Naomi Campbell has dismissed reports she's retiring from the catwalk and bemoaned the lies that are told about her, reports AFP.

"Some of the press said I've retired, but I'm choosing to promote my perfume as opposed to doing the shows. Simple as that," she told Sydney's Sunday Telegraph.

She said she wanted to model less but "I'd never say 'I retire' from anything. I would just simply stop. I don't believe in announcements like that."

Campbell, in Australia to sell her eponymous perfume, has a reputation of being difficult to work with, but she said it was a myth created by John Casablancas, who runs the Elite modelling agency.

"When people say I'm difficult it almost makes me laugh because the whole thing stems from when I left Elite, the agency run by John Casablancas," she said.

"He is a very irrational person and doesn't think before he speaks, so he went around saying how difficult I was. That's how it began and it seems to have stuck."

There are so many lies said about me that I'm shocked."

## Suicide bomber killed: Bid to blast Lankan port foiled

COLOMBO, Feb 6: Navy troops intercepted and killed a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber who was attempting to infiltrate a strategic port in northeastern Sri Lanka, defence officials said today, reports AFP.

A frogman from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was trying to get into Trincomalee harbour when he was detected by patrolmen on Friday, a defence spokesman here said.

"It was a suicide bomber who probably tried to carry out a big attack to coincide with the independence day celebrations," a defence ministry spokesman here said.

Security was stepped up throughout the country for the 52nd anniversary of independence on Friday. President Chandrika Kumaratunga stayed away from the main celebrations here amid fears of bomb attacks.

On the eve of the celebrations, bombs went off in three buses wounding at least 30 passengers.

The latest round of fighting

known as Eelam war III erupted when the LTTE sank two navy craft berthed at the Trincomalee port in April 1995 ending a truce that lasted just 100 days.

Tigers are leading a drawn out campaign to establish an independent homeland called Eelam in the island's northeast for minority Tamils.

JAKARTA, Feb 6: Separatist rebels of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and government troops clashed twice, both sides said today, but gave conflicting casualty claims, reports AFP.

The Indonesian military, TNI, said eight of its soldiers and three rebels were wounded in fighting on Saturday, while GAM said 10 soldiers were killed and that they had suffered no casualties.

## Soldiers, rebels clash in Aceh

JAKARTA, Feb 6: Separatist rebels of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and government troops clashed twice, both sides said today, but gave conflicting casualty claims, reports AFP.

The Indonesian military, TNI, said eight of its soldiers and three rebels were wounded in fighting on Saturday, while GAM said 10 soldiers were killed and that they had suffered no casualties.

## Kazakhstan lifts ban on Proton rockets

ALMATY, Feb 6: Kazakhstan has lifted a ban on launching Proton rockets imposed after a Russian booster crashed at Kazakhstan's Bajkonur cosmodrome, which Russia's space programme relies on heavily, reports AP.

Two Proton crashes last year and subsequent launch bans have further delayed the International Space Station project. Russia plans to use a Proton to launch the crucial crew module of the station from Bajkonur this year.

The Kazakh government announced Friday night that it would resume all launches from Bajkonur, built when Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union and now leased by Russia.

The decision came after the Kazakh government's aerospace committee approved a Russian report on why a Proton crashed immediately after liftoff last October, a government statement said.

## BRRIEFLY

**Croatians go to polls today:** Croats go to the polls on Monday to elect a new president to succeed late Franjo Tudjman, but neither candidate wants to wield the same absolute power. AFP reports from Zagreb.

The problem for voters, in this second round of the presidential election, may be in choosing between two very similar and allied candidates. Both the contenders -- centrist Stipe Mesic and liberal Drazen Budisa -- come from a new centre-left parliamentary majority, which only a month ago inflicted a crushing defeat on Tudjman's nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ).

**Philippines mayor shot dead:** Two young communist guerrillas shot and killed a town mayor inside a church in Mindoro province off the main Philippine island of Luzon on Sunday, AFP reports from Manila.

Mayor Oscar Aldaba of San Teodoro town was about to leave the church after attending Sunday Mass when he was stopped by two men, who said they were members of the communist New People's Army (NPA). They then shot him at close range, local police chief Inspector Andrew Aguirre said.

## Kashmir set to clash with Delhi over autonomy

SRINAGAR, India, Feb 6: The local government in India's troubled northern state of Kashmir is on a collision course with the central authorities in New Delhi over the thorny question of political autonomy, reports AFP.

Kashmir's ruling National Conference party had approved and submitted a report to the federal government, recommending that Muslim-majority Kashmir be given full autonomy "except in matters related to finance, defence and communications."

The proposal would return Kashmir to the status it enjoyed before 1953, when it also had its own constitution.

National Conference officials argue that the step is crucial to finding a lasting solu-

tion to the 10-year Muslim separatist insurgency in Kashmir that has claimed more than 25,000 lives.

After the partition of the subcontinent into Pakistan and India in 1947, Kashmir's Hindu ruler acceded to India as Pakistani troops moved in to the state.

India and Pakistan still dispute ownership of the divided state, which has triggered two wars between the South Asian rivals.

Most of the rebel groups fighting in Kashmir favour accession to Pakistan.

The National Conference request for greater autonomy is likely to receive a cold reception in New Delhi, where the Hindu-nationalist BJP party, which dominates the coalition

government, is bitterly opposed to any such measure.

"We are not even in favour of granting quasi-autonomy status to Kashmir and to even raise the issue is unhealthy," said BJP vice president J.P. Mathur.

A local BJP leader and state legislator in Kashmir, Ashok Khojuria, argued that greater autonomy would only fuel separatist sentiments.

"We will oppose autonomy tooth and nail, both in Kashmir and New Delhi," Khojuria said.

The National Conference argues that its victory in 1996 state assembly elections -- when the party won 78 out of a total 87 seats -- was a de facto vote for autonomy which New Delhi would be ill-advised to ignore.

"The government of India

should seriously consider the document and grant autonomy to the state," said senior NC leader Ali Mohammad Sagor.

The autonomy question is being pushed hard by Kashmiri Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah, who has come under fire from Kashmiris for unfulfilled electoral promises, and from the central government for failing to tackle the Muslim militancy effectively.

Critics have accused Abdullah of using the issue of autonomy to divert attention from the shortcomings of his state government.

And BJP officials in New Delhi are not the only ones opposed to the National Conference proposals.

Kashmiri guerrilla and political separatist organisations

have both rejected autonomy as not going far enough to meet the aspirations of the Kashmir people.

"What is the point of an exercise that will keep the Kashmir problem lingering on," said Shabir Shah, a separatist political leader, who has spent more than 20 years in different Indian jails.

"A permanent solution has to come through talks among the representatives of Kashmir, Delhi and Islamabad. To resolve Kashmir one cannot ignore any of the three parties," he said.

Leaders of the minority Hindu and Buddhist communities in Kashmir have also voiced concern, seeing autonomy as a first step on the path to total secession from India.