

Chechen president declares partisan war

Moscow prepares to send 50,000 troops

MOSCOW, Feb 11: Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov declared today the start of a partisan war throughout the breakaway republic, as Moscow intensified its efforts to destroy the last rebel strongholds in the mountains, reports AFP.

The rebels plan to wage war in the southern mountains, on the northern plains and in every village in the republic, Russia's private NTV television station quoted Maskhadov as saying.

He denied Moscow's claims that the Russian military assault on Chechnya was a battle against banditry, or terrorism, saying it was a war against the Chechen people.

During the first 1994-96 Chechen conflict, the rebels launched a war of ambushes and skirmishes against the "occupying" Russian forces, en-

abling them to retake several localities and eventually push Moscow forces out.

On Monday, Maskhadov said his troops aimed to retake the Chechen capital, Grozny, which has been under Russian control for nearly a week.

The separatist rebels fled Grozny on February 1, taking up positions in the south of the republic, which the Russian forces have been bombing heavily as a precursor to a ground offensive.

Russian warplanes carried out 160 raids in the last 24 hours in the mountains, destroying a number of rebel bases and military installations, Russian military officials told the Interfax news agency on Friday.

In Irum Kala, a village in the Argun gorge that was captured

by Russian paratroopers on Thursday, federal troops on Friday were under orders to search for and destroy remaining rebels, the Russian North Caucasus headquarters told ITAR-TASS.

The troops were also clearing landmines from administrative buildings and homes in the village, ITAR-TASS said.

Moscow prepared to send 50,000 federal troops into the mountains to crush the last pockets of rebel resistance in what Moscow hopes is the last phase in the nearly six-month offensive.

The Chechen fighters had suffered severe losses in the bombing campaign, Sergei Yastremsky, Moscow's spokesman on Chechnya, said on Thursday. The Russians dropped 1.5-

US may drop N Korea from terrorist list

WASHINGTON, Feb 11: The United States said Thursday it would consider removing North Korea from its list of countries supporting terrorism, thereby opening up the Stalinist state to increased US aid, if Pyongyang were to take the necessary steps, reports AFP.

"For example, if North Korea and the United States resume our dialogue on counter-terrorism, and they were to take the additional steps that we think are necessary, they are a country that could be removed from the list," said department spokesman James Rubin said.

Designation as a state sponsor of terrorism carries with it heavy penalties, including a cut-off of most US aid, and the North Koreans are known to be eager to remove themselves from the list.

Only six other countries — Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Syria — are now designated as state terrorism sponsors.

The United States is working on the final arrangements for the first North Korean high-level visit here, seen as an important step in the tense process of rapprochement between the Cold War enemies.

"One of the things that we would be wanting to do — we've been prepared to do this for some time — is to sit down and explain the additional steps necessary and hopefully those steps will be taken" to remove North Korea from the terrorist list, Rubin told reporters here.

"Obviously we would need to have the kind of assurances that there is not going to be the state sponsorship of terrorist acts on a repeated basis and evidence or steps that we consider sufficient to justify their lack of linkages to such groups," he said.

Labour govt's popularity slips

LONDON, Feb 11: British voter support for Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour government has slipped below 50 per cent for the first time since it came to power in May 1997, an opinion poll showed today, reports Reuters.

The Gallup poll for the daily Telegraph newspaper signalled that Labour's standing with voters had been damaged by a run of bad publicity since the start of the year.

The poll put Labour on 49 per cent — down four points since early January.

The only good news for Blair was that the opposition Conservatives failed to capitalise on the government's discomfort over issues ranging from the National Health Service to accusations of cronyism.

The poll showed the Conservatives were on 28 per cent, down two points over the past month. The Liberal Democrats were on 15 per cent, up three points.

No immediate comment was available from Blair's office but commentators said the poll underlined the need for the Labour government to halt the string of bad headlines in recent weeks.

The year began with a flu outbreak which triggered serious bed and staff shortages in the National Health Service. Official figures showed rising crime. Media reports forced a government investigation into fraud allegations against a company once chaired by former Labour Minister Geoffrey Robinson.

Indonesian generals to press Wiranto to quit

JAKARTA, Feb 11: Indonesia's President Abdurrahman Wahid said top generals will press former military chief General Wiranto to quit the cabinet to avoid a showdown, official media reported today, reports Reuters.

The generals have pledged their loyalty to Indonesia's first democratically-elected president and will push Wiranto to resign before Wahid returns from an overseas tour on Sunday, the Antara news agency said.

"I rang Jakarta this morning and I learned through my aides that a number of generals have pledged their support for me," the agency quoted Wahid as saying in Seoul.

"If he refuses to step down, this will hamper his future career ... so it's better that Wiranto resigns," he said without elaborating or naming the generals.

Wahid and his senior minister appear to be heading for a

potentially explosive showdown as Wiranto continues to defy Wahid's call to him to quit after UN and Indonesian inquiries implicated him in the bloodshed surrounding East Timor's independence vote last year.

Wiranto's disobedience has fuelled fears of a coup in the world's fourth most populous nation, rattling financial markets.

But most analysts feel his stand is part of a play to secure immunity from prosecution or a pardon. Wahid has already said he would pardon Wiranto, now the country's coordinating minister for political and security affairs.

On Thursday, armed forces chief Admiral Widodo pledged the military's loyalty to the civilian government and said there would be no coup.

Last week, Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono said he had asked Wiranto to resign from cabinet, but added nothing

Pak coup not prearranged

Musharraf's secretary tells court

KARACHI, Feb 11: Pakistan's army chief General Pervez Musharraf did not plan in advance the October military coup which swept him to power, his secretary told a court here today, reports AFP.

Musharraf was sacked on October 12 last year as he flew back to Pakistan on a commercial jet from a visit abroad. Hours after the plane landed the general had seized power and detained prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Sharif is now on trial with six of his officials, accused of denying the Pakistan International Airlines jet landing permission in Karachi.

The seven men pleaded not guilty to hijacking, abduction, attempted murder and terrorism but face the death penalty if convicted.

It is not true that this case has been filed to make an excuse and justify the takeover," Taj told the court.

The brigadier recounted how the pilot told Musharraf the plane had been denied landing permission anywhere in Pak-

istan.

Taj quoted Musharraf as saying: "Make sure that this information is not passed to the passengers because it will create chaos, panic and confusion."

Taj said he tried to contact people on the ground using three mobile phones, but none worked. Taj, Musharraf and the pilot talked about which other airfields the plane could divert to.

"The pilot was in a state of confusion. The situation was getting grim, tense and disappointing by the minute," Taj said.

Taj said the plane circled around Karachi until General Iftikhar Ali Khan came on the cockpit radio and said the airport was under army control and it was safe to land the plane, he said.

It is not true that the coup was prearranged," he said.

He also denied the case against Sharif had been created to justify the coup, as Sharif himself has claimed.

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