

Putin makes debut on Western stage amid protest on Chechnya

Presidential polls in Chechnya within two years

LONDON, Apr 17 : Russian President-elect Vladimir Putin made his debut on the Western stage here today in a visit marked by human rights protests over his country's role in Chechnya, reports AFP.

Putin kicked off his 24-hour stay by meeting British business leaders at the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in central London.

He was later due in Downing Street for talks with Prime Minister Tony Blair on issues including Russia's relations with Europe, Chechnya and Kosovo, disarmament, drugs, international crime and terrorism, and British investment in Russia.

Putin arrived in London late Sunday, vowing that presidential elections would be held in Chechnya within the next two years.

Human rights groups are expected to protest outside Downing Street, the prime minister's official residence.

The human rights groups

have condemned Blair for hosting the Russian leader while his country faces international criticism over alleged human rights abuses in the separatist republic of Chechnya.

But Foreign Office minister Keith Vaz defended the visit and said Blair would be raising the issues of Chechnya and human rights with Putin.

"These issues are important and they will be discussed. They also have to be seen, however, in the context of the wider relationships," he told the BBC.

It is extremely important that Britain and the European Union engage with Russia. Russia is the EU's largest trading partner," he said.

"There is a new generation of leaders emerging in Russia and it is very important that we should be there at the start, building up that very strong relationship."

The Muslim Council of Britain also spoke out against Putin's visit Monday. Secretary General Iqbal Sacranie said the

government was doing business with a man with "blood on his hands".

"The dead, maimed and injured of Chechnya cry out for justice every bit as much as the dead of Kosovo, Bosnia or Rwanda," he said.

Amnesty International urged Blair to use Putin's visit to press for a UN inquiry into Russia's brutal military crackdowns in the Caucasus republic.

While the opposition Conservative Party's foreign affairs spokesman Francis Maude said: "Tony Blair needs to send a clear message -- for long-term partnership with the West, Vladimir Putin must become the first Russian leader to offer his people the rule of law and an open economy, not a 'back to the future' scenario of rigged capitalism, thuggish authoritarianism and military adventurism."

He also told journalists Blair's action could pave the way for improved relations

with other Western countries.

"Tony Blair extended his hand to Russia and showed that he was ready to talk ... If other countries follow the path begun by the British prime minister, we would be delighted," he said.

The Russian leader views Britain as an important go-between in Russia's international relations, notably with the United States and Europe.

While in London, Putin is expected to honor Soviet soldiers killed during World War II by placing a wreath at the Soviet War Memorial.

He will also be received by Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Castle.

Russia allows civilians to reenter Chechen capital

Meanwhile, Russian troops today reopened roads to the Chechen capital Grozny to civilian traffic, the ITAR-TASS news agency reported, citing military sources.

Passenger ferry sinks as Manila mulls death penalty law

MANILA, Apr 17 : Reckless ship owners in the Philippines were threatened with the death penalty today, as the second ferry to sink in five days went down, government officials said, reports AFP.

All 137 people on board the Penafrancia were rescued when it hit an uncharted underwater hazard as it sailed into the port of Batangas, south of here at 2:00 a.m. (00:00 BST Sunday), the coastguard said.

Last week, the overloaded Anahada sank off the southern island of Sulu, claiming at least 139 lives.

Transportation and communications secretary Vicente Rivera ordered the Maritime and Industry Authority on Monday to be more "vigilant" in ensuring passenger safety at sea.

He warned ship owners that the transportation department was drafting a law that would make "reckless imprudence by ship owners a heinous crime" punishable by death.

Rivera, who did not say when the proposed legislation would be sent to Congress, ac-

cepted owners of allowing vessels to sail with passenger numbers beyond their capacity.

Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado has described overloading of ferries as "rampant."

But ship operators argued if the death penalty was to be introduced it would have to include government officials as well.

"In my opinion, I think that proposed measure will not help," said Nelson Morales, head of safety management at Sulpicio Lines Inc., one of the country's leading shipping operators.

"The best way to do it is to have a law wherein government authorities will also be included (in the death penalty) like inspectors and agencies that give licenses to captains," he told.

He said Rivera's proposal could be tantamount to "economic sabotage" since it could scare prospective investors from the shipping industry.

"If I were a ship owner and that becomes a law then I would go out of this business," Morales said.

NEW DELHI, Apr 17 : Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee today urged the Commonwealth nations to lead a global fight against gender inequality, reports AFP.

"The Commonwealth represents today's world, transcending barriers of the North-South Divide and the distance that separates developing economies from developed countries," Vajpayee told Commonwealth ministers responsible for Women's Affairs here.

"It can show the way to the need for cooperation among nations and open society within nations so that a just and equitable social order can be ensured in which women (do not) suffer from the disability on account of their gender identity," Vajpayee said.

Vajpayee said India, the largest member of the Commonwealth, had played a major role in promoting gender equality but admitted there was a lot more to be done.

"We take pride in the fact that we are the world's largest democracy... In the 21st century, we are faced with new challenges, as are other countries," Vajpayee said.

Vajpayee said many of the challenges had a direct bearing on women.

"For instance, the challenge of ensuring sustainable development and coping with the socio-economic impact of globalisation and structural adjustment," he said.

"Our aim is to remove barriers and roadblocks so that new avenues are opened to a new world of opportunities for women," the prime minister said.

He said although India had made significant progress in the elimination of discrimination against women we acknowledge that a lot more re-

mainds to be done."

Vajpayee said that after the

1995 Beijing UN World Conference on Women, Equality and Peace "it would be worthwhile to take stock of the status of women across the world and this meeting provides an opportunity for this purpose."

Commonwealth Deputy Sec-

etary General Dame Veronica Sutherland over the weekend

had said that privatisation in

many developing countries had

led to cuts in public expenditure

on education and health which

hit women the hardest.

Sutherland said the three-

day meeting here would focus

on bridging the gender gap, vi-

lence against women and ensur-

ing that both the sexes benefit

from the opportunities arising

from globalisation.

The meeting comes ahead of

a special session on women

scheduled during the UN Gen-

eral Assembly in June.

Strike cripples Indian state of Tripura

AGARTALA, India, Apr 17 : India's northeastern state of Tripura came to a near standstill today as a strike called to protest against the massacre of 12 people took hold, reports Reuters.

Government offices, businesses, shops, schools and colleges were shut because of the 24-hour strike called by political parties including the state's ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) to press for federal help in dealing with militancy.

Suspected separatist guerillas of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) killed 12 people and wounded eight on Saturday when they opened fire in a village market in Kalyanpur, 95 km (60 miles) northeast of the state capital, Agartala.

Tripura's ruling Communist Party said it had urged the federal government to send reinforcements to help quell the rebellion.

"The centre (federal government) should cooperate with the state in dealing with the menace," the party said in statement.

4 killed in Kashmir

Srinagar, India, Apr 17 : Four Muslim separatists were killed and three Indian soldiers injured in separatist-linked violence in the disputed Kashmir region, police said today, reports AFP.

The militants were killed in a gunbattle with the Border Security Force at Burzahama village, 12 kilometers (7.4 miles) south of Srinagar overnight Sunday," a police spokesman said.

The gunbattle is still continuing and some houses in the village have been damaged," the spokesman said.

No money in Moscow to destroy chemical arms

MOSCOW, Apr 17 : Russia does not have the money to destroy its 40,000-tonne chemical weapons stocks by the year 2007 as promised, the officer commanding anti-chemical warfare defence forces said today, reports AFP.

"There's a delay of roughly four years in the programme," said General Stanislav Petrov, quoted by Interfax agency.

"Russia is technically capable of destroying its chemical arms in time, but lack of funds will prevent this," the officer added.

Bin Laden calls on Muslim youths to fight US

ISLAMABAD, Apr 17 : Circulating in Pakistan's deeply conservative Northwest Frontier Province is a call to Muslim youth from suspected terrorist, Osama bin Laden, to wage war against the United States, re-ports AP.

The message, addressed to "dear youths of the Muslim world," condemns the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia and vows to wage a jihad or holy war against the US until they are withdrawn.

"The youth should contact us as soon as possible. Territorial boundaries have no importance in our eyes. All the land belongs to God," says bin Laden's message written in Urdu, Pakistan's national language.

The small poster-size message on a glossy background depicts burning US Indian and Israeli flags, as well as a cocked and ready to fire Kalashnikov rifle.

"Our jihad (holy war) will continue until America is expelled from Saudi Arabia and other countries of the world," says bin Laden.

"It is our responsibility to free the world from their (US) control," he said. "The non-Muslim world should know it well that a Muslim is always ready to die in the name of God."

Actor/director Antonio Banderas poses for photo-

graphs with the two ALMA awards he garnered for outstanding actor in a feature film for his role in "The 13th Warrior" and for outstanding director of a feature film for "Crazy in Alabama" during the fifth annual American Latino Media Arts Awards Sunday in Pasadena, California. The awards honour the positive portrayal of Latin Americans in films, television and music and will be telecast in the US on June 17.

— AFP photo

Bin Laden also vowed to continue his battle against the US.

"I am not afraid of America. I will continue my work. No one can stop me," he said.

Also circulating in Pakistan

is another glossy poster-size message, this one from the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar.

The message is for the US Administration and US President Bill Clinton in particular.

Referring to Clinton as corrupt, Omar in his message vows never to hand over bin Laden to the United States.

"Even if the whole of Afghanistan is destroyed we will never deliver Osama. A Muslim cannot deliver a Muslim to a non-Muslim."

The strident message depicts the white flag of Afghanistan's Taliban religious army in one corner and a sword in the opposite corner.

Omar accused the United States of using bin Laden as a pretext to attack Islam. The poster-size message surfaced in Pakistan following last month's visit to the region by Clinton.

During a six-hour visit on March 25, Clinton sought the help of Pakistan's army ruler Gen. Pervez Musharraf to per-

suade the Taliban to hand over bin Laden, one of the 10 most wanted men in the US.

Washington accuses bin

Laden of masterminding the

1998 twin attacks on its em-

bassies in East Africa.

The US wants bin Laden to stand trial one terrorism

charges either in the US or in a third country. The Taliban have refused.

Omar accused the US of

planning further action against the Taliban. The US in 1998

fired Tomahawk cruise missiles at eastern Afghanistan taking aim at alleged training camps operated by bin Laden's Al-Qaida group. Last year the US barred all investment in and trade with the Taliban. The United Nations followed in November 1999 with limited sanctions against the Taliban

and the Taliban in 2000.

East Asians dominate the

immigrant enclave but not yet

in such numbers it can properly

be called a Chinatown. It's a China-Philippines-India-Nigeria-Morocco-Bangladesh Town,

heterogeneous nationalities

huddling together in homoge-

nous Rome.

The incense stores, Nike-

knockoff emporiums and tropi-

cal-fruit vendors of Rome's es-

timated 210,000 legal immi-

grants sprawl over only a few

blocks. But 10 years ago, few, if any, were there.

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