

International

Palestinians call for second 'day of rage'

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Dec 9: A group of 13 Palestinian factions were moving forward today with plans for a "day of rage" to mark the 13th anniversary of the onset of the first intifada, or uprising, against Israeli occupation, reports AFP.

In the Gaza Strip, the press said, the Fatah movement of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat called for a rally at midday to mark the occasion.

The announcement, also signed by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, called on Palestinians in the West Bank to join in solidarity marches in memory of "martyrs" killed Friday.

Seven Palestinians and three Israelis were killed in east Jerusalem and the West Bank in clashes and anti-Israeli attacks Friday.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat left today for Saudi Arabia, one of the principal donors to the Palestinian territories since violence erupted in September, officials said.

He was to "raise with the Saudi leadership the continuing Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people and the blockade on the Palestinian territories," a Palestinian official told AFP.

During his brief visit, he is to meet with King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz.

On Monday, the official Saudi SPA news agency reported Saudi Arabia has granted 26 million dollars to the families of victims of the intifada in the Palestinian territories.

Tuvalu PM dies

WELLINGTON, Dec 9: Prime Minister Ionatana of the tiny South Pacific state of Tuvalu died suddenly on Friday night, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark said, reports Reuters.

New Zealand diplomatic sources said Ionatana was delivering a speech at a function in Tuvalu marking aviation links with Fiji when he excused himself and sat down.

It was thought that he suffered a heart attack, his third, and efforts to revive him failed.

Tuvalu is a tiny low-lying island country with a population of 10,500, north of Fiji and midway between Australia and Hawaii.

Ionatana was a public servant in the days before Britain's Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony was separated into the states of Kiribati and Tuvalu in 1978.

Ionatana, whose funeral is to be held on Tuesday, has moved in recent times to expand his country's international links. Tuvalu joined the United Nations in September.

Princess Masako slaps media

TOKYO, Dec 9: Ahead of her 37th birthday celebration today, Crown Princess Masako said she regretted disappointing the nation's expectations by having a miscarriage but also criticising the press for its "overheated" coverage of her pregnancy, reports AP.

Masako suffered a miscarriage in December last year, weeks after newspaper reports that she was pregnant touched off a media frenzy about the possibility of Japan finally having a new heir to the Chrysanthemum throne.

The princess and Crown Prince Naruhito do not have any children, raising concern about the continuity of the centuries-old imperial line.

"I know that there were great expectations among the people, and I too feel that what happened at the end of the year was unfortunate," she said in a pre-birthday news conference on Thursday.

But she added: "I was disturbed by the overheated coverage in the mass media from the start."

She said that her husband helped her recover from the ordeal.

"His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince was deeply attentive to my needs and helped through that experience," she said.

Masako also expressed sympathy for people who were forced to evacuate their homes this year because of volcanic eruptions in Japan's northernmost main island of Hokkaido and on a small island south of Tokyo.

"It grieves me greatly when I think of the great many residents of these regions who are still forced to live in shelters far away from the comfort of their homes," she said.

HR situation in Asia remains grim

HONG KONG, Dec 9: From Kashmir to Indonesia and Sri Lanka to China, human rights abuses are committed with impunity and often the connivance of authorities, international organisations said in reports to mark Human Rights Day Sunday, reports AFP.

Despite a growing awareness of human rights in the Asia-Pacific region during the year, the situation remains as grim as ever, they said.

Detainees were routinely tortured or ill-treated in police custody in almost every single country in the region, they added, saying rebellions in particular saw widespread abuses visited on both sides.

"Regrettably, burgeoning demands for recognition of human rights in the region have not led to corresponding growth in implementation," the Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) concluded.

"Throughout most of Asia respect for human rights remains low and in a number of countries glaring violations persist."

Nevertheless the AHRC welcomed the growing emergence of organisations and individuals speaking out against abuses.

"There has been a big movement towards recognising the importance of human rights in the region, mostly from civil society," Basil Fernando, executive director of AHRC told AFP.

Previously groups were afraid to take a stand, he said.

However the downfall of the former Indonesian president Suharto in 1998 precipitated the growing empowerment of civic groups and "shattered the 'Asian values' model once and for all."

But Fernando cautioned against concluding that governments were stepping up efforts to respect human rights.

"Most Asian states continue to confine respect for human rights to mere declarations and take virtually no steps towards enforcement. Often they obstruct domestic and international efforts to develop effective remedies."

Fernando highlighted the contradiction between the Chinese government's crackdown on the Falungong spiritual group and its signing of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1998.

Some 74 members of the spiritual movement are reported to have died in police custody since the movement was banned last July.

Devadas Gnanan, director of Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific regional office in Hong Kong, also welcomed the "positive trend towards growing awareness."

But he too was scathing in his criticism of the Asian failure to take concrete steps.

"They have done nothing major in response. Governments have to realise that they cannot just pay lip service to the notion of human rights," Gnanan told AFP.

Gnanan slammed Asian governments for failing "to take even basic steps to stamp out torture and ill treatment" which he said occurred in police custody in nearly all countries in the region.

Internal and ethnic conflict was identified by the watchdogs as one of the major factors exacerbating rights violations.

"In all countries where armed rebellion against the government was underway, all parties to the conflict were responsible for abuse" safe in the knowledge that subsequent prosecution was rare, the New York-based Human Rights Watch said in its annual report released on Thursday.

"In Kashmir, Indian security forces used draconian counter-insurgency measures, including arbitrary arrest, torture and staged 'encounter killings' against Muslim citizens who were suspected of supporting guerrilla activity, while armed Islamists were believed responsible for mass killings of Hindu civilians."

The group highlighted the suffering of one million internally displaced civilians in Sri Lanka caught between the Tamil Tiger rebels and government forces and the more than 300,000 civilians displaced by fighting between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia's Maluku islands.

Myanmar was singled out as one of the worst offenders, with the military junta taking "no steps to improve its dire human rights record," Human Rights Watch said.



Demonstrators shout slogans next to a poster for a human rights film festival during a human rights rally in Bangalore yesterday. The protesters were demanding justice for human rights violations and alleged police brutalities committed against ordinary citizens ahead of Human Rights Day. In a recent report, the Hong Kong based Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) stated that "Throughout most of Asia the respect for human rights remains low and in some countries glaring violations persist".

Gunman kills 20 in Sudan mosque attack

CAIRO, Dec 9: A lone gunman fired at random in a mosque near the Sudanese capital Khartoum on Friday, killing at least 20 worshippers and wounding 40 before police shot him dead, Sudan's state television reported, reports Reuters.

The official Egyptian Middle East News Agency (MENA) said earlier more than 30 people had been killed and 100 wounded in the shooting during prayers at the mosque in Khartoum's sister city of Omdurman.

Sudanese television said the attack had been carried out by a member of a Muslim sect, al-Takfir wa al-Hijra (Rununciation and Exile), who was shot dead by police at the scene.

It named him as Abbas Baqir Abbas, from the village of al-Dasis in Sudan's al-Jazirah region. It said he had fired on police officers trying to arrest him and they returned fire.

The television quoted a police statement as saying 20 people had been killed and more than 40 wounded, some seriously.

The report, monitored by the BBC, showed film of bodies in pools of blood and wounded people in bloodied clothes.

MENA said an angry crowd had gathered outside a hospital in Omdurman where the casualties had been taken, demanding revenge for the attack on the mosque, which belongs to supporters of another Muslim faction, Ansar al-Sunna.

The Khartoum-dated MENA report gave no other details of the shooting, but said Ansar al-Sunna mosques had come under attack twice before in Sudan, including a 1996 incident in which 12 people were killed in Omdurman.

Sudan is due to hold presidential and parliamentary elections phased over nine days starting on Monday.

Most opposition parties are boycotting the polls, in which President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, whose 1989 military coup brought an Islamist government to power, is seeking election.

Indian arrested at Manila airport with diamonds

MANILA, Dec 9: Manila airport authorities arrested an Indian businessman on Saturday who was attempting to leave the Philippines with two bags of diamonds worth 650,000 dollars in cash, officials said, reports AP.

Officials said Prakash Chandani was carrying two satchets of diamonds, 7.5 million pesos (dhs 150,000) in Philippine currency and 25 million pesos (dhs 500,000) more in assorted foreign currencies when he was stopped shortly before he was to board a Cathay Pacific flight to Hong Kong.

The diamonds, of still undetermined value, and cash were found inside Chandani's hand-carried luggage, the officials said.

Interior Secretary Alfredo Lim said Chandani will be charged with economic sabotage.

Lashkar-i-Taiba threatens to launch attacks in Kashmir

ISLAMABAD, Dec 9: The Pakistan-based guerrilla group Lashkar-i-Taiba today threatened to launch further attacks against Indian forces in Kashmir and called New Delhi's peace overtures a "trap," reports AFP.

The threat came in a statement issued by Abdurrehman Aldhakil, commander of the group's fighters operating in the Indian zone of the divided Himalayan state, of which Pakistan controls the northern third.

"The Indian Ramadan truce is nothing but a trap meant to damage the Kashmiri freedom movement," he said, referring to India's unilateral ceasefire to militant groups, which started in Kashmir on November 27.

Pakistan has responded with a pledge to exercise "maximum restraint" along the disputed border in Kashmir, but most militant outfits have rejected the Indian ceasefire initiative.

Lashkar has claimed responsibility for some of the attacks following the Indian gesture.

Aldhakil said the "low morale" of Indian forces in

Kashmir as a result of "mounting pressure" from Islamic fighters had also forced New Delhi to offer the ceasefire.

New Delhi has welcomed Islamabad's pledge but cold-shouldered its proposal for a three-way dialogue between India, Pakistan and Kashmiris on resolving the 53-year-old Kashmir dispute.

The row over Kashmir, which is claimed by both Pakistan and India, has been a source of two wars and a bloody border conflict.

"Indian forces will face more hard blows from Lashkar mujahideen," Aldhakil said, adding that the Kashmiri struggle was now in a decisive phase.

"When our goal is in sight jihadi groups should not be swayed by any deceptive moves by India."

Pakistani Foreign Minister Friday welcomed India's offer to consider allowing Kashmiri leaders to visit Islamabad but warned a militant ceasefire depended on New Delhi ending its "repression."

He also said Islamabad was prepared to be flexible on the "details" of its proposal for a three-way dialogue.

Estrada vows to finish his term as President

MANILA, Dec 9: A defiant Joseph Estrada vowed today to finish his term as Philippine president, insisting his corruption trial in the country's Senate would not affect his work, reports AFP.

"History will prove us right," he told a cheering crowd in one of his rural heartlands.

Amid accusations of endemic abuse of power in his regime in the trial, which began on Thursday, Estrada has been keen to convey an image of "business-as-usual," working even harder on official matters.

Speaking Saturday in the northern province of La Union, where he launched a community health program, the impeached president said: "I am convinced that the truth will prevail in the

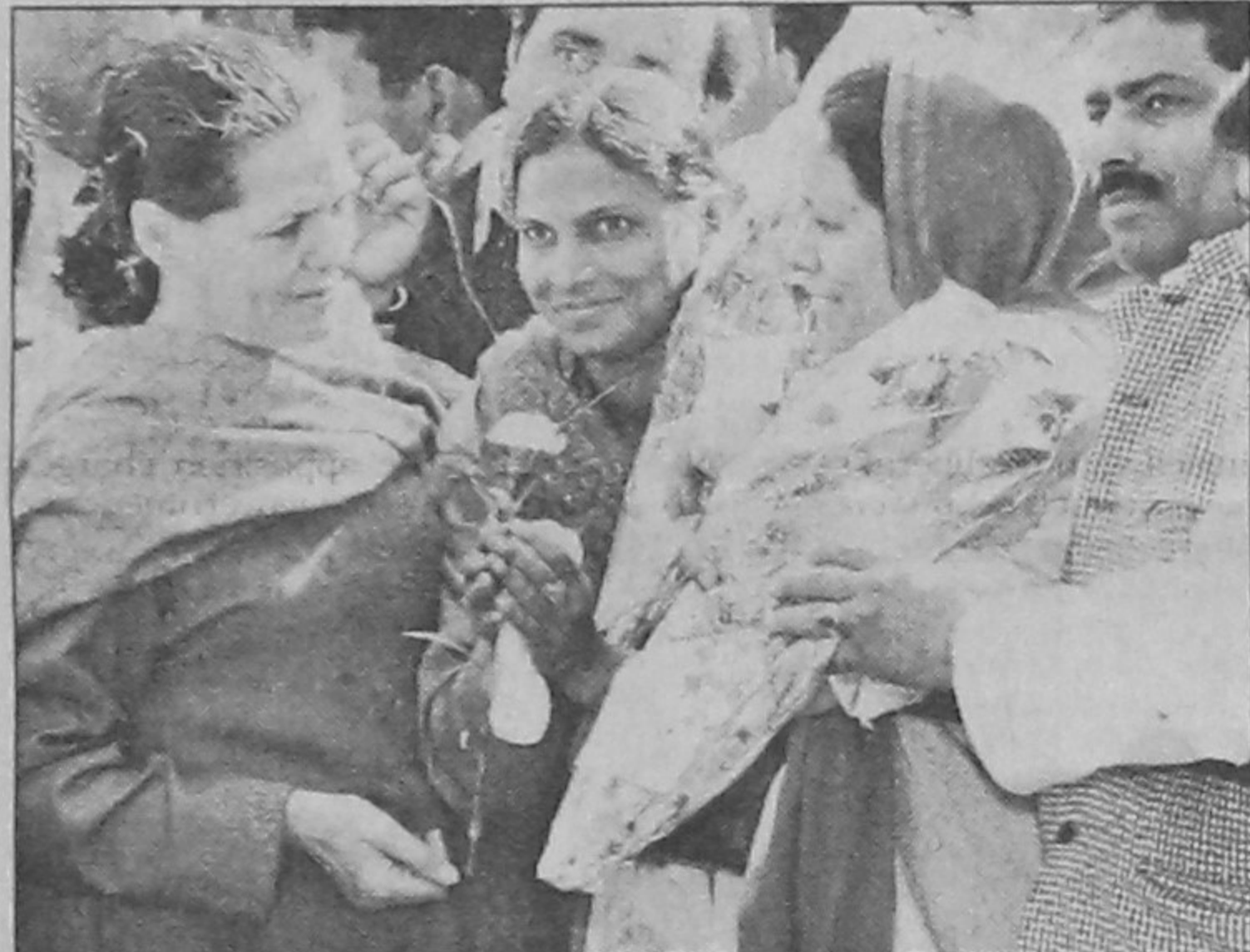
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"I am convinced that I will be cleared of all the issues that are unfairly being levelled against me."

"These issues will never hamper me from performing my job as president," Estrada said, belittling the frequent protest rallies demanding his resignation or removal from office.

"In spite of all noise and protest rallies... we will continue to do our work. In the end, we will prevail. History will prove us right," Estrada told the crowd.

As well as the sortie to La Union, Estrada was to visit the insurgency-ravaged central island of Negros on Sunday to meet officials and make a speech on his government's peace efforts with communist rebels.



Sonia Gandhi (L), Congress (I) Party president, receives flowers from wellwishers yesterday on her 55th birthday at her residence in New Delhi. Sonia kept her position as party president after an unprecedented challenge by a senior party leader.

N Korea delays military talks with South

SEOUL, Dec 9: North Korea has put back military talks with South Korea on a cross-border railway and highway by another week, the South's defence ministry said today, reports AFP.

The North proposed the talks, the third round, be held at the northern side of the border village of Panmunjom on December 21, a week later than the South's offer, it said.

The ministry said it decided to take the North's revised offer.

The construction project is a result of a summit between the South's President Kim Dae-Jung and the North's leader Kim Jong-Il in June.

Military authorities from both sides will have to cooperate to remove landmines from the four-kilometer-wide border, which has divided the peninsula since the 1950-53 war, for the new project.

Both sides exchanged draft accords on averting possible border clashes during construction at the second round of talks Tuesday.

Brigadier General Kim Kyong-Dok has led the South's delegates and Colonel Yoo Young-Chol the North's.

White House confce on Culture and Diplomacy

WASHINGTON, Dec 9: President Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright recently invited the Aga Khan, Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, and other distinguished panellists to advise them on the role of culture in foreign policy.

The panel at the White House conference on Culture and Diplomacy included Nigerian Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, Italian Minister of Culture Giovanna Melandri, world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma, former American Poet Laureate Rita Dove and Joan Spero, President of the Doris Duke Foundation, says a press release.

Welcoming the Aga Khan as "a powerful voice for culture and development around the world," Hillary Clinton remarked, "if we want history and identity to be preserved in the global marketplace, culture matters."

In his opening remarks, President Clinton explained the objective of the Conference.

Introducing the panel's comments to nearly 200 prominent US and foreign diplomats, artists, cultural figures, and corporate and foundation heads, the Aga Khan highlighted the following key challenges for cultural diplomacy:

First, the need to enable cultures, especially of the developing world, to be accessible in English in addition to the national languages that were used as "building blocks for nationhood by the countries emerging out of the decolonisation."

Second, the need to protect cultures in those parts of the developing world where institutions that sustain and promote the arts and the humanities (e.g. museums, conservatories and historic sites) are extremely weak.

A third challenge, echoed by President Clinton, was the need to mobilise resources so that people in the developing world who live from culture, such as artists and musicians, "are able to live in an honourable manner" and in dignity.



A fan puts a candle on John Lennon's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame to commemorate the 20th anniversary of his death, in Hollywood, on Friday.

11 Russian soldiers killed in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Dec 9: At least 11 Russian soldiers and two civilians were killed by separatist rebels on Friday, news agencies reported Saturday, says AFP.

Five servicemen were killed and six wounded when rebels opened fire on about 24 federal positions, the Russian North Caucasus military command told Interfax Saturday.

Two soldiers from the interior ministry's elite OMON force also died when their jeep hit a landmine, the news agency reported.

Armed rebels broke into a regional hospital in Urus-Martan Friday, killing two soldiers and two nurses, ITAR-TASS reported.

Meanwhile, one soldier was killed and three wounded in a shoot-out with rebels in the Chechen capital Grozny, where some 300 separatists are thought to be hiding out.

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