

International

India extends Kashmir truce

Militants welcome extension, Pakistan cautious about its response

NEW DELHI, Dec 20: India today extended its unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir by another month and said the government would take "exploratory steps" towards resuming a dialogue with Pakistan, reports AFP.

"After careful consideration of all aspects, the government has taken a decision to extend the period of no-initiation of combat operations by another month," Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told parliament.

Vajpayee cited a decrease in "terrorist" violence and in the infiltration of militants across the disputed Kashmir border with Pakistan. A further review of the ceasefire will be taken after Republic Day on January 26, 2001, he added.

Indian security forces suspended operations against Muslim militant groups in Kashmir on midnight November 27 for the holy Islamic month of Ramadan.

Vajpayee said his government had been "greatly heartened" by the response of citizens, political parties and other organisations in Kashmir to the ceasefire initiative.

"There has also been a decline in incidents of terrorist violence in that state," he said.

However, he added some hardline Pakistan-based militant groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba had continued to cause the "unfortunate and regrettable" loss of life of innocent civilians and security personnel.

"The government remains firm in its resolve to combat these and other challenges, also to defeating their inhuman and nefarious designs."

He also highlighted a "significant decline" in militant attempts to cross the Line of Control (LoC) — the de facto border dividing Indian and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

"This must cease entirely," he added.

The current ceasefire is the first to have been offered by New Delhi in Indian Kashmir since the outbreak in 1989 of the separatist insurgency that has claimed 34,000 lives.

Vajpayee's statement, which implicitly recognises a Pakistani role in reducing the level of violence and cross-border infiltration, will boost hopes of concrete peace talks.

"As the initiator of the dialogue process with Pakistan, India remains committed to it," Vajpayee said, adding that New Delhi would initiate "such exploratory steps as are considered necessary" so that talks with Islamabad could resume.

India, Pakistan and the Kashmir separatists have all voiced their willingness to begin talks, but problems remain over the modalities. Islamabad reacted cautiously to Vajpayee's announcement.

"We have to see this statement because usually the Indian statements have all kinds of conditionalities attached," said Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman Riaz Mohammad Khan.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars and a border conflict over

Kashmir, which was split between them in 1947.

"The extension of the ceasefire is part of a process to create the right ambience for talks, with the government hinting that we should give it more time," said C. Uday Bhaskar, deputy director at the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi.

"But I would be a little cautious about saying whether the talks at this stage could include Pakistan," Uday Bhaskar said.

In Kashmir, separatist leaders stressed the need for a permanent peace in the region.

"We welcome the extension of the ceasefire if it is aimed at resolving the issue of Kashmir forever," said Abdul Gani Lone, a senior leader of Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Party Hurriyat Conference.

"If the ceasefire has been extended with a goal to start negotiations on Kashmir it is a healthy development," Lone said.

Meanwhile, separatist leaders in Kashmir welcomed today the one-month extension of the Indian security forces' ceasefire, but stressed the need for a permanent peace in the region.

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"If the ceasefire has been extended with a goal to start negotiations on Kashmir it is a healthy development," Lone said.

Indian security forces had suspended operations against Muslim militant groups in Kashmir on midnight November 27 for the Islamic month of Ramadan.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee announced the one-month extension in the lower house of parliament in New Delhi.

Lone said the Hurriyat executive committee would meet on Thursday to discuss Vajpayee's announcement and unify its stance on future peace talks.

Another report from Islamabad adds: Pakistan will examine the fine print of India's ceasefire extension in divided Kashmir before giving its official response, a foreign office spokesman said today.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee earlier extended New Delhi's month-long ceasefire by another month, in the latest initiative to kick-start a peace process in the troubled Himalayan territory.

Foreign office spokesman Riaz Mohammad Khan told AFP it was too early for Islamabad to say what its response would be and the announcement needed careful consideration.

"We have to see this statement because usually the Indian statements have all kinds of conditionalities attached," he told AFP.

Pakistan responded to India's unilateral suspension of military operations against separatists with a promise to show maximum restraint along the tense unofficial border in Kashmir, the scene of frequent skirmishes.



Miss Malaysia Chinese Universe pageant winner Chloe Ong Sei San (L) first runner-up Rachel Ong (C) and second runner-up Joelin Xiao Seng (R) were present yesterday to meet with the Minister of Transportation Datuk Seri Dr. Ling Liong Sik. Unlike Muslim Malay women, Malaysian women of Chinese descent can participate in all forms of beauty pageants, which are very popular amongst the Chinese Malay population.

Bush to promote use of religion to fight poverty

AUSTIN, Texas, Dec 20: In his first policy-oriented event since becoming US President-elect, George W. Bush will today highlight his vow to use religious institutions in the fight against poverty, reports AFP.

Bush will meet with several ministers in the Texas capital as part of his effort to promote the use of "faith-based" government welfare programs, expand charitable giving and increase tax credits for adoption.

"It's the important... next step in welfare reform and it's important to start building the coalitions, support and ideas," said Bush spokesman Dan Bartlett. "This is the beginning of working on and talking about a substantive agenda and the implementation of an agenda."

Later in the week, Bush will continue his policy discussions, focusing on education and agriculture, aides said. On Thursday, Bush will meet with members of Congress and, separately, with Latino leaders to discuss education reform.

The meeting in Austin will also highlight Bush's effort to reach out to African-Americans, 90 percent of whom voted for Al Gore in the 2000 election. Last week, Bush spoke with civil rights leader Jesse Jackson, who was extremely critical of the vote in disputed Florida, where there were charges of minority voter disenfranchisement.

About one-third of the ministers scheduled to attend the Wednesday meeting are black. They include Muslim, Christian and Jewish representatives.

"It's also about reaching out to

these important constituencies that are going to not only help, but believe in bringing the agenda together and getting it past the Congress, but also they're the ones who are going to be implementing it," Bartlett said.

Bush spoke of faith-based initiatives in his first major policy speech as a presidential candidate, and he has spoken in the past of his own reliance on religious counseling when he quit drinking in 1986.

Under his proposal, Bush would spend eight billion dollars in the first year of his presidency to provide new tax incentives for charities and other private institutions that, as his campaign literature put it, "save and change lives."

He also promised to create an "Office of Faith-Based Action" in the White House, remove legal barriers to the participation of religious groups in government programs, add new adoption incentives and develop "second-chance" homes for unwed teen-agers.

A recent poll by the Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press found that more than half of all Americans support giving tax dollars to religious groups that provide job-training, drug counselling and other services.

But the idea has been controversial. Several religious leaders in Texas — where Bush pushed faith-based initiatives as governor — criticised the programs as a dangerous blurring of the lines between government and religion.

Jakarta rules out extension of truce with Aceh rebels

JAKARTA, Dec 20: Indonesian Defence Minister Mohammad Mahfud today ruled out extending a truce with separatist rebels in Aceh when it expires on January 15, following a visit to the province by President Abdurrahman Wahid, reports AFP.

Mahfud also said the government was seeking dialogue with more Aceh groups in addition to the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in its bid to end bloodshed in the resource-rich province.

GAM has been fighting for an independent Aceh sultanate for 25 years.

"For sure it (the truce) won't be extended. But it doesn't mean we will stop negotiating," Mahfud told journalists at the state pal-

ace, echoing Wahid's statement Tuesday in the provincial capital of Banda Aceh on Tuesday.

Talks have been held between government ministers and Acehese leaders recently, Mahfud said.

All ministers in charge of security and sociopolitical affairs have often been visited by Acehese community leaders. These talks will be crystallised through a formal forum," Mahfud said.

Military might would only be used against separatist guerrillas if there was no more "light at the end of the tunnel," he said.

"At the moment there are still many lights at the end of the tunnel because GAM is only a small part of the Aceh people."



US Vice President Al Gore meets with US President-elect George W. Bush in the living room of the vice president's residence in Washington, DC, on Tuesday.

--AFP photo

Jiang urges Macau, HK to curb anti-China acts

MACAU, Dec 20: Chinese President Jiang Zemin today urged Macau's rulers to stamp out any anti-China activities in a speech marking the first anniversary of the enclave's return to Beijing's rule, reports AFP.

Jiang said the mainland government would not intervene in the daily running of the former Portuguese colony, but that authorities in the Macau Special Autonomous Region (SAR) should prevent acts undermining China.

The Chinese leader was speaking at a cultural gala after some 40 members of the Falungong spiritual movement, which is banned on the mainland but not in Macau, were arrested to stop them protesting during his visit.

Jiang also said his message applied to Hong Kong, which returned to Chinese rule in 1997 under the same "one country, two systems" formula allowing both former colonies a high degree of autonomy.

"The Macau SAR should take concrete measures to defend the national interests and the authority of the central government and should never allow anyone to stage any activities in Macau against the central government or to split the country," Jiang said, quoted by the official Xinhua news agency.

At least five Falungong practitioners were arrested Tuesday in Macau, while 32 were detained at Macau's ferry port as they tried to arrive from nearby Hong Kong.

An Australian-Chinese Falungong member Kelly Hong Xu, 30, told AFP seven police officers stopped her when she arrived in Macau early Wednesday to take part in exercises in a park by about 20 practitioners.

"After dragging me into a lift, they started punching me on my head and body," she said.

"They carried me out of the lift and forced me to board a Hong Kong-bound ferry, despite my protests that they were infringing my human rights," said Xu.

Police briefly interrupted the morning exercise in the park, asking the group to take down banners condemning Jiang for Beijing's crackdown on the sect. The exercises were then allowed to resume.

But Frank Lu, director of the Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, said the clampdown in Macau proved China was not respecting its commitments.

"If Macau's authorities ban us from entering, then there is no such thing as 'one country, two systems,'" said Lu, who was also prevented from entering the territory.

Japan had secret deal with US to host nuclear bombs

TOKYO, Dec 20: Japan's government flouted its own cherished anti-nuclear policy by secretly agreeing three decades ago to host US nuclear weapons, the Asahi Shimbun said today, reports AFP.

Quoting from newly declassified documents marked "secret" or "top secret", the newspaper said former prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone gave the go-ahead in 1970 for the United States to bring nuclear arms into Japan.

Japan, traumatised by the nuclear bombs that obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II, has since 1959 maintained a policy of "no production, no possession and no introduction" of nuclear weapons.

"It is already known from US documents that Nakasone agreed during a September 1970 meeting with US officials that Japan would allow nuclear weapons in times of emergency," the Asahi Shimbun said.

"But this is the first time official documents from both sides have come to light," it revealed.

The documents report a meeting between Nakasone, then the cabinet-level chief of the Japanese Defence Agency under prime minister Eisaku Sato, and US defence secretary Melvin Laird.

"The Japanese records show that Nakasone told Laird that Japan would not need to develop its own nuclear weapons as long as the US nuclear deterrence was in place," the newspaper said.

"The US side said it would deploy all types of weapons to help defend Japan in accordance with the Japan-US Security Treaty."

A secretary to Nakasone, who went on to be prime minister from 1982 to 1987, told AFP: "Nakasone said he may have made such a statement during his meeting with Laird."

"But he said his memory is not clear as the meeting was held 30 years ago," the aide said.

A foreign ministry official responded: "We cannot confirm the report immediately."

Previous reports have also discussed the existence of secret nuclear deals between Japan and the United States at the height of the Cold War.

A year ago, US Ambassador Thomas Foley insisted the United States had stuck by its nuclear obligations to Japan, after a US science journal said it had stored nuclear arms on the Japanese mainland until the early 1960s.

UN building attacked with rocket, gunfire in Kosovo

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, Dec 20: Unidentified gunmen fired a rocket propelled grenade at a United Nations police station and administrative centre in northern Kosovo and sprayed it with bullets, a police spokesman said today, reports AFP.

Dmitri Kaportsev said that no one was hurt in the incident at around 10:30 pm (3:30 BST) Tuesday, in which a car was destroyed by an "explosive device," an RPG damaged the building and four more UN cars were damaged by gunfire.

No one was arrested following the incident, he added.

Two police officers had just returned to the building when they heard the explosion destroy the car parked outside and a burst of automatic gunfire, Kaportsev said.

Following the incident two platoons of Danish peacekeepers from Kosovo's NATO-led peace-keeping force were deployed to the town, which was calm Wednesday morning, force spokesman Major Steven Shappell said.

Zubin Potok is in a majority Serbian area of the north of Kosovo near the town of Leposavic, which was evacuated by UN police at the weekend after

a riot in which two protesters died, three NATO vehicles were burned and peacekeepers fired warning shots and tear gas.

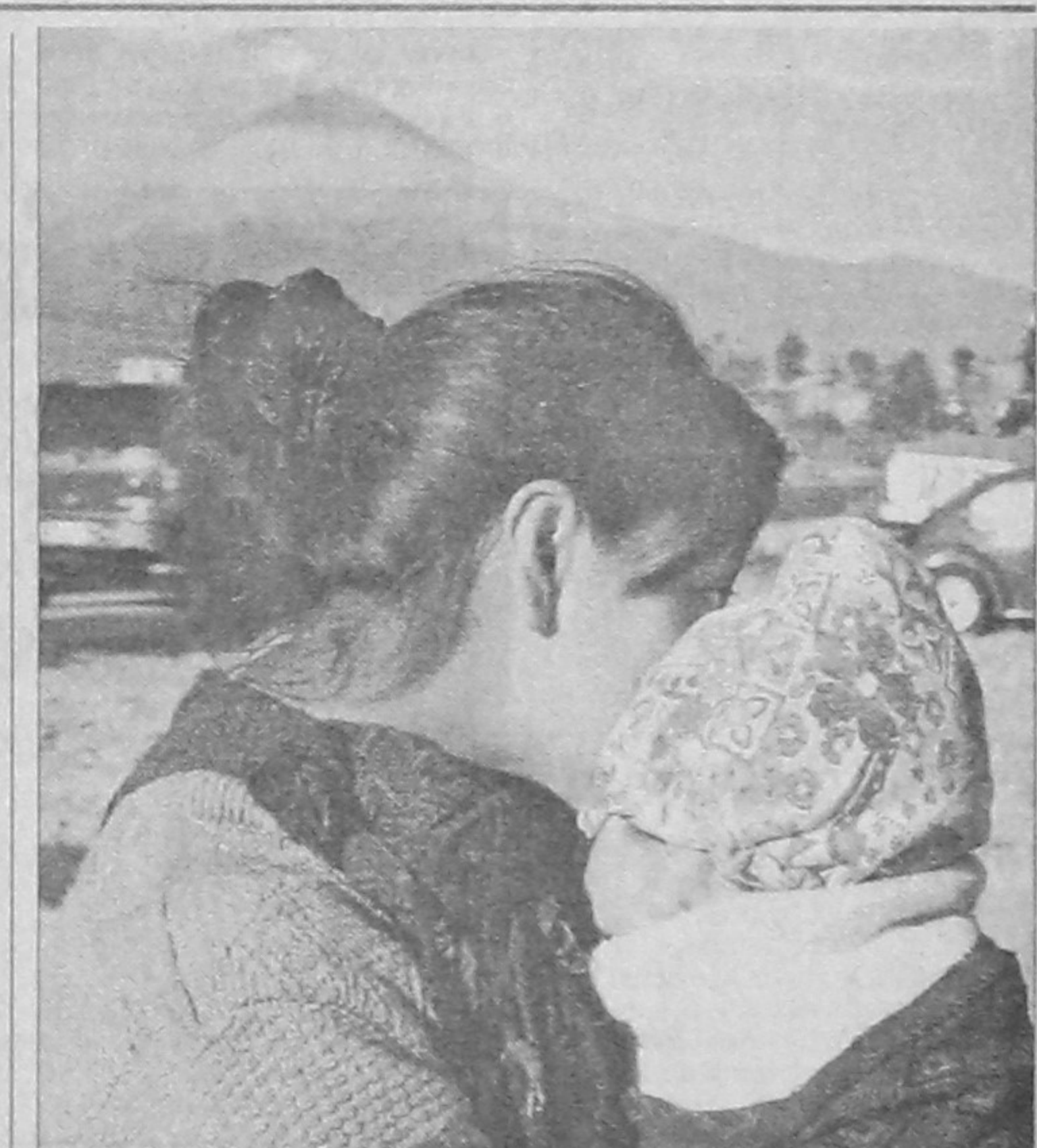
Meanwhile, Yugoslavia Tuesday demanded that the UN Security Council curb the activities of ethnic Albanian guerrillas operating out of a buffer zone in southern Serbia, along its boundary with Kosovo.

"It is now of utmost importance that Albanian terrorists pull out immediately from the Ground Safety Zone," the new Yugoslav foreign minister, Goran Svilanovic, said before the council.

He was referring to the five-km wide demilitarised buffer zone along the Serbian side of the boundary between Serbia and Kosovo which NATO imposed on Belgrade in 1999.

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia therefore expects the Security Council to take appropriate measures this time around to address the situation in a proper way," Svilanovic said.

He also called on Kosovo's NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping force and the UN mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, to "take effective measures to stop further incursions by Albanian terrorists from Kosovo."



A woman and her child evacuated from San Nicolas de las Farmas, Mexico due to the eruptions of the Popocatepetl volcano, holds her son after having spent the night next to the highway near Papaxtla, Mexico on Tuesday. Many people have refused to leave their properties, but others have now decided to leave following violent eruptions on Monday.

--AFP photo

UNSC slaps broader sanctions on Taliban

UNITED NATIONS, Dec 20: The UN Security Council has slapped broader sanctions against the ruling Taliban militia in Afghanistan for its alleged support for "international terrorists," reports AFP.

The Security Council on Tuesday imposed an arms embargo, reinforced its existing air embargo, ordered the closing of the group's offices abroad, and forbade Taliban officials to leave Afghanistan.

The resolution, presented by the United States and Russia, was passed with 13 votes. China and Malaysia abstained from the vote.

The council reiterated a demand that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden, the Saudi dissident and billionaire indicted in the United States for his alleged role in US embassy bombings in East Africa in 1998.

The Security Council resolution also demanded that the Taliban close down "all camps where terrorists are trained within the territory under its control."

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia angrily denounced the UN resolution early Wednesday and accused the world body of being an enemy of Islam.

The United Nations has no clue. They use Osama when they do not have something else. Our policy on Osama will remain the same," Information Minister Qudratullah Jamal told reporters Wednesday in Kabul.

"This is an issue against our Islamic system. We cannot change our system because America wants us to. Nor can we behave as

they want," Jamal said.

The Taliban representative at the UN, Abdul Hakeem Mujahid, issued a statement saying peace negotiations with the opposition would no longer take place under UN auspices.

"Since the UN Security Council so illegally and inhumanly rewards Afghanistan with more suffering, Afghanistan's government will cease all negotiations under UN auspices," the statement said. "We will negotiate with the opposition directly or through other institutions."

Financial sanctions and sanctions against Ariana Afghan Airlines were imposed by the UN last year after the Islamic militia refused to extradite bin Laden.

The latest resolution requires states to deny any aircraft permission to land or overfly their territories if it is coming from, or is destined for, a Taliban-controlled part of Afghanistan.

The resolution also notes that Afghanistan benefits directly from illegal opium production and bans the import of all precursor chemicals used in the elaboration of heroin, a hard drug derived from opium.

The sanctions will go into effect in one month and will last for a period of 12 months that can be renewed -- a provision requested by France, which is campaigning for time limits on all sanctions regimes.

Alternate UN representative at the United Nations Nancy Soderberg told the council,

"With this important action today, the Security Council sends an unequivocal message to the Taliban: end your support for terrorism. Let us hope that they will at last heed our call."

The Taliban, who took power in 1996, control 90 per cent of Afghanistan. An opposition alliance controls the other 10 per cent.

The United Nations has withdrawn all foreign staff from Afghanistan amid concern over potentially violent protests against the expected sanctions, officials in Kabul said Tuesday.

UN and other foreign relief workers, many of whom have also left in recent days, supply crucial aid to hundreds of thousands of Afghans devastated by 20 years of civil war. The country is also suffering from its worst drought in 30 years.

Doctors Without Borders on Tuesday issued a statement warning against "a serious human rights deterioration" in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of several non-governmental organisations.

"Crucial relief operations have practically ground to a halt," the statement added.

Ahead of Tuesday's vote, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, at his year-end news conference, criticised the broader sanctions as likely to hamper peace and humanitarian efforts.

AI alarmed at Falungong men's deaths in Chinese police custody

BEIJING, Dec 20: Amnesty International said today China was guilty of appalling human rights abuses against the Falungong spiritual group, and that an alarming number of followers were dying in police custody, reports AFP.

The London-based human rights group said China's communist government was becoming more brazen and brutal in its treatment of the group, which was banned as an "evil cult" in July 1999.

"While China claims it is committed to promoting and protecting human rights, the crackdown on the Falungong and other 'heretical' groups is being stepped up and the number of victims is growing daily," said an Amnesty statement.

At least 77 followers are reported to have died in custody or shortly after release in unclear circumstances or following reports of torture and ill-treatment, Amnesty said.

"It appears many of them died as a result of torture or after force-feeding while they were on a hunger strike," Amnesty said.

Violence rocks Gaza as US kicks off last-ditch peace bid

GAZA CITY, Dec 20: Israeli troops killed a 10-year-old Palestinian boy and two firemen as violent confrontations flared in the Gaza Strip today, casting a shadow over US President Bill Clinton's final bid to forge an elusive peace in the Middle East, reports AFP.

Hani As-Sufi, 10, was shot in the head after getting caught in a fierce exchange of fire between armed Palestinians and Israeli troops near the Rafah refugee camp on the border with Egypt, in some of the heaviest fighting in the Gaza Strip in a week.

Two firemen were also killed when soldiers shot at their fire engine from an army jeep near the Netzarim Jewish settlement, a frequent trouble spot during the past 12 week spiral of deadly unrest, witnesses and hospital officials said.

They were identified as Rifaat Abu Mazuk, 35, and Nibal Oun, 28.

The three deaths brought to 347 the number of people killed since the unrest flared in late September.

US officials, hosting separate talks with Israelis and Palestinians in the first major push for

peace since the failed Camp David summit in July, appealed for the cycle of violence to be broken.

"It's still very critical that the cycle of violence be broken," US State Department spokesman Philip Reeker told reporters even before the latest bloodletting.

"If negotiations are to be successful, the situation on the ground will have to change," he added.

But both Israeli and Palestinian negotiators were downbeat about the chances of a breakthrough in the talks at the Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, which kicked off against a backdrop of political turmoil in Israel ahead of February's prime ministerial election.

"We don't have very high expectations," said Israeli negotiator Gideon Sber, echoing a similar remark by chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat who told reporters: "I do not have high expectations."

Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright were to meet with the two sides during discussions that are expected to last until Friday but the State Department said no timetable for the

visits had been established.

"We may see, at some point, that the Israelis and Palestinians would meet directly on their own," Reeker said.

In other diplomatic moves in the region, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak met in Cairo with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and was due later to meet Yossi Sarid, chief of the left-wing Israeli Meretz party and an envoy of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

Another Barak envoy, Justice Minister Yossi Beilin, arrived in Jordan Tuesday for a meeting there with King Abdullah II.

US officials were reluctant to divulge any specific information about the schedule of meetings at Bolling, the agenda to be discussed or possible proposals Washington might make to break the impasse.

However, since the Camp David summit collapsed in July the parties remain at near polar odds over the most sensitive issues dividing them, and if Clinton hopes to secure a peace deal by the time he leaves office in 31 days, quick and substantial progress must be made, officials allow.