

Indian government declares 2001 as Women's Empowerment Year

NEW DELHI, Jan 1: The Indian government, under flak for much of last year for failing to pass legislation reserving seats for women in parliament, has declared 2001 as "Women's Empowerment Year," reports AFP

In a special message published in most newspapers Monday, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called on people to join hands with the government to uphold and protect "the rights of women and the girl child."

"Ensuring gender equality by removing gender discrimination is the key to real empowerment," Vajpayee noted, adding that "developing countries that have made a remarkable social progress have done so primarily through the empowerment of women."

The prime minister said India had made tremendous progress in the political empowerment of women, an increasing number of whom were being elected to public office.

However, his statement came just a fortnight after angry women MPs ringed Vajpayee in parliament, demanding that he push through a bill reserving 33 percent of seats for women.

Women's organisations and feminists were not impressed by the "empowerment year" designation.

Suu Kyi spends 100 days under house arrest

BANGKOK, Jan 1: Myanmar pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi spent her 101st consecutive day under virtual house arrest as the New Year began Monday, waiting for the military government to make good on a promise to release her, reports AP.

Suu Kyi was confined to her Yangon home on September 22 after she defied government restrictions on her movement and tried to travel by train to the northern city of Mandalay to visit members of her embattled National League for Democracy.

In all, nine NLD leaders were put under confinement, but six were released on December 1. Party heavyweights NLD Chairman Aung Shwe and vice-Chairman Tin Oo remain detained and about 80 NLD supporters arrested at the same time are believed held at Yangon's Insein Prison, according to diplomats.

A Myanmar government spokesman contacted in Yangon would give no clues Monday about when Suu Kyi would be freed, saying he "would not like to speculate on this issue at this stage."

On Dec 12, Myanmar Foreign Minister Win Aung told a meeting of European and Southeast Asian ministers in Laos that Suu Kyi would be released at "an appropriate time" but did not give a date.

That vague promise was seen as a concession to European critics of the junta's human rights record, who had swallowed their pride and agreed to end a three-year boycott of the inter-regional dialogue and sit at a table with top Myanmar officials.

Myanmar's military, which kept Suu Kyi under formal house arrest from 1989 to 1995, refused to hand over power to the NLD after it overwhelmingly won a general election in 1990. Since the polls, it has harassed and arrested hundreds of NLD members, although it remains a legally registered political party.

One window of opportunity for the junta to ease restrictions on Suu Kyi could be a visit starting Friday by UN special envoy to Myanmar Razali Ismail, who is charged with the difficult task of brokering a political dialogue between the Myanmar government and the NLD.

Yangon-based diplomats suggest Suu Kyi could be released after Razali's five-day visit because it would give an impression the move would be due to the UN envoy's mediation, rather than the pressure from Europe.

Razali, a former Malaysian diplomat, was able to meet with Suu Kyi twice at her house during a visit in October. He is the only diplomat to have had contact with Suu Kyi since her confinement began.

An Asian diplomat in Yangon said Razali had sought in October to secure Suu Kyi's release but a sticking point was the NLD leader's insistence that she will keep trying to travel outside the capital, which she views as her right.

In recent years, Suu Kyi has repeatedly tried to visit the provinces of Myanmar and been blocked every time.

The government accuses her of deliberately provoking confrontations with the authorities but the tactic has won her worldwide sympathy and helped keep the international spotlight on her democracy struggle, even as the NLD suffers official persecution and forced resignations of party members.

"I am tired and bored to death with this hypocrisy," said Madhu Kishwar, editor of the women's magazine, Manushi.

"The government is the problem not the solution," Kishwar said, adding that government agencies like local municipal corporations and courts were "guzzling" the money earmarked for developmental activities.

The women of India do not need "schemes" where people organising seminars "pocket the money meant for development," she said.

Nina Puri, president of the Family Planning Association of India, agreed that the declaration of 2001 as "Women's Empowerment Year" was mostly cosmetic.

"Most of the money earmarked either by the government or other agencies is wasted," Puri said.

"There is no follow-up or sustainability of these programmes or intentions towards women."

According to Puri, change in gender attitudes has to be ushered in by the middle classes and unless they are "motivated to shrug off the shackles, no amount of programmes or schemes will change the lot of women in India."



A man carries a boy on his shoulders yesterday as they pray for health and happiness before the altar at the Meiji-jingu Shrine in central Tokyo. About 89 million people will likely visit major shrines and temples throughout Japan between January 1 and 3 to wish-in the New Year and a good 2001, the National Police Agency said. --AFP photo

N Korea vows to build powerful nation, seeks reunification

SEOUL, Jan 1: North Korea ushered in 2001 Monday with a vow to build a "powerful nation" while pledging to seek peaceful reunification of the two Koreas, reports AP.

"The year 2001 is a year of new advance and a great turn in which a broad avenue will be opened for the building of a powerful nation," North Korea said in a New Year's message.

The message called for the North's people to unite around leader Kim Jong Il and intensify efforts to build a "powerful nation" a slogan presented for the last several years.

"A key factor in making a new advance under the red flag along the path of socialism in the 21st century is to stick to the revolutionary army-first policy," it said.

North Korea caused alarm throughout the region after firing a rocket, which flew over Japan and landed in the Pacific in 1998. Pyongyang later agreed not to go

ahead with another test-firing of rockets while continuing talks with the United States on improving relations.

As in recent years, North Korea issued its New Year message in the form of a joint editorial carried by its ruling party, military and newspapers.

The message described the year 2000 as "a year of great turn marked with momentous events unprecedented in the history of the Korean nation and brilliant achievements."

Inter-Korean relations improved significantly last year.

The two Koreas held a historic summit in June, arranged reunions of separated families and convened cabinet, military and Red Cross talks on improving ties. They also began reconnecting a cross-border railroad.

"It was the remarkable event in the Korean national history to see that more than 50-year-long bottlenecks for Korea's reunion

were removed," it said.

"The North and the South will achieve reunification in an independent and peaceful way and through overall national unity," the editorial said.

North Korea also said it will focus on improving the standards of people's living this year.

The North has been depending on outside aid to feed its people since its agriculture industry collapsed in the mid-1990s after years of bad weather and mismanagement.

Its central task is "to consolidate the existing economic infrastructure and display its potentials to the full while conducting a forceful campaign for refashioning the national economy as a whole with up-to-date technology," the message said.

Meanwhile, South Korea vowed to make efforts to further improve ties with North Korea while keeping a strong security posture against a possible mili-

tary threat.

The government will steadily push forward its inter-Korean policies in an effort to reduce South-North tensions and promote bilateral exchanges, heralding the age of peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula," South Korean President Kim Dae-jung said in a New Year's address.

Arthur C Clarke predicts amazing new millennium

COLOMBO, Jan 1: As 2001 finally dawned today, sci-fi guru Arthur C. Clarke said the next 100 years would be even more amazing than the last and predicted people would soon be directly plugged into their computers, reports AFP.

Clarke -- who co-wrote the screen play of Stanley Kubrick's movie "2001: A Space Odyssey" in 1964 -- said computer keyboards and voice recognition software may be replaced by "brain caps."

In an article published in the Sunday Observer, Clarke wrote: "It seems obvious that the ultimate input-output device would bypass all the body's sense organs and pass its signals directly into the brain."

"Exactly how this (brain cap) will be done I leave to biotechnicians to decide... one feature that might delay its general adoption is that the wearer would probably have to be completely bald to use the tightly fitting helmet."

"So wig-making could become really big business in the next century."

Clarke, who prophesied the establishment of geo-stationary satellites 55 years ago, said many thought he was really taking things too far" by proposing a computer capable of a high-level of artificial intelligence such as the "HAL" computer -- star of "2001".

"I have to say that my most obvious error was that of underestimating the extent to which miniaturisation would overtake the computer industry."

The last century had shown that it was technically possible to achieve whatever people

wished to in the field of communications. "The only limitations are financial, legal and political," said the author who turned 83 last month.

"The information age offers much to mankind, and I would like to think that we will rise to the challenges it presents," he said.

"But it is vital to remember that information in the sense of raw data is not knowledge. That knowledge is not wisdom; and that wisdom is not foresight. But information is the first essential step to all of these."

With the expansion of the Internet and other developments, Clarke said the new millennium will be more amazing than the last.

"There are many people who are genuinely alarmed by the immense amounts of information available to us through the ever expanding Internet."

To them, I can offer little consolation other than to suggest that they put themselves in the place of their ancestors at the time of the invention of the printing press.

"My God," they cried. 'now there could be as many as a thousand books. How will we read them all?' Strangely, as history has shown, our species survived that earlier deluge and some say even advanced because of it."

"The very existence of a myriad of new information channels, operating in real time and across all frontiers, will be a powerful influence on civilised behaviour."

"What I am saying in fact, is that the debate about the free flow of information which has been going on for so many years

will soon be settled by engineers, not politicians.

"Just as the physicists, not generals, have now determined the nature of war."

Clarke, who has lived in Sri Lanka since 1956 and has more than 80 books to his credit, also maintained 2001 marked the "real beginning of the third millennium" but said in a statement issued Wednesday that dates did not matter.

"We should be less concerned about adding years to life, and more about adding life to years." Clarke never patented his idea of geo-stationary communications satellites, because he did not think it would be realised during his lifetime.

Clarke also lamented that the 20th century had also been one of the most savage and wanted the world to shed some of its cruel customs.

"Slavery, torture, racial and religious persecution, treatment of women as chattels, mutilation of children because of ancient superstition, cruelty to animals - the list is endless and no country can claim total innocence."

Clarke himself has been accused of abusing children in Sri Lanka and when he was honoured with a knighthood in 1998 he asked for the investiture ceremony to be postponed until he was cleared of charges of paedophilia.

He was born in Minehead, England, in 1917 but lives in Sri Lanka, which has honoured him by naming a science institute after him and making him chancellor of a university.