

International

Fireworks, good cheer and high hopes mark advent of New Year

LONDON, Jan 1: Much of the world welcomed 2001 with fireworks, good cheer and optimism, and even in troubled lands the hope of a better future prevailed, report agencies.

Bundled up in a red cloak on unusually blustery cold night in Italy, Pope John Paul II made a midnight New Year's Eve appearance to a prayerful, cheering crowd in St. Peter's Square.

"I wish that the new millennium brings to all nations, peace, justice, brotherhood and prosperity," the 80-year-old pontiff said as fireworks exploded over the hills. "In particular, my thoughts go to the young people, the hope of the future."

Revellers flocked onto the streets early Monday to usher in the new year, century and millennium across Asia but some members of the Falungong Chinese spiritual group in Singapore were in police custody as midnight struck.

Parts of the South Pacific that had witnessed special celebrations at the

dawn of 2000 -- considering that to be the start of the new century and millennium -- were relatively less exuberant this time round.

However, the event coincides with Australia's 100th anniversary -- an event Prime Minister John Howard rates as the greatest historical celebration in the nation's short history.

January 1 marks the centenary of the day when six British colonies united to form a country created legally by the signing of the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900 by Britain's Queen Victoria.

Yugoslavia's celebrations, the first since the ouster of Slobodan Milosevic, were dubbed "the first free New Year."

In Argentina, police blocked off Corrientes Avenue in Buenos Aires to create space for a New Year's Eve tango-fest.

"What worries? I am just here to dance! Tango is one of the great wonders of Argentina," said Alberto Pajesz.

Revelers around the United States geared up for New Year's Eve celebrations, even as cities in the northeast and nation's heartland worked to clean up the messes left by massive winter storms.

Snow plow drivers in New York City spent the morning clearing about 30 centimetres snow from Times Square in preparation for more than 500,000 people expected for the big New Year's Eve celebration.

But in Turkey, a bomb explosion in downtown Istanbul injured 10 people early Monday. Thousands of panicked people celebrating in nearby Taksim Square, which is surrounded by chic shops, cafes and cinemas, fled the area.

Pakistan's militant Muslims warned against celebrations and deployed extra soldiers to make sure no dancing took place, and authorities in Lebanon and Syria warned celebrants to leave their guns at home.

"Gunfire is an uncivilized phenome-

non," said Al-Baath, the newspaper of Syria's ruling party. "Some people think that gunfire and fireworks reflect happiness. ... They are very dangerous."

In Paris, a thousand drummers from all over Europe were recruited to beat the countdown to midnight in unison at the Georges Pompidou Centre.

Fifteen parachutists from the United States, Europe and Asia leaped from the old millennium to the new as midnight chimed Sunday, using the world's tallest skyscrapers as a launch pad.

"What a great New Year!", cried an exuberant Ed Trick, 38, a carpenter from Petaluma, California, one of the nine Americans who joined in the dive from Malaysia's Petronas Twin towers, each 1,483 feet tall.

The jump started at 15 seconds before midnight, so that when they landed time had moved forward to a new millennium at least in the view of those who insist that 2000 was the last year of the second millennium AD.



The crowd gathers to celebrate the New Year and the new century in Shanghai yesterday. --AFP photo

Taiwanese ship aborts landmark China trip

KINMEN, Taiwan, Jan 1: A passenger ship heading from Taiwan's outlying island of Kinmen to the Chinese mainland today aborted a landmark voyage launching links between the rivals barely an hour after setting sail, reports AFP.

Passenger boat Haian No. 1 carrying 55 passengers and crew was to have made the 90-minute journey to Xiamen in Fujian province only 41 kilometres away to launch unprecedented direct "mini-links" between Taiwan and China.

But the ship owner said it had to abort the mission due to bad weather.

"The skipper asked me if we

should return when we reached a point where the waves were very high, and we decided to return for safety considerations," said Ho Chin-liang, chairman of the shipping company.

"There was no political consideration," Ho said, denying reports that the ship had failed to obtain entry permission from the Chinese authorities.

"Our ship is allowed to make a port call at nearly all of the mainland harbours according to their laws," Ho said. It was not immediately clear when the ship would resume its voyage.

700 Falungong members arrested in China

BEIJING, Jan 1: Police beat and arrested members of the outlawed Falungong spiritual group as hundreds defied a huge security presence to protest in Beijing's central Tiananmen Square today, reports AFP.

Small groups demonstrating against the government's 17-month ban on the movement popped up all over the square throughout the day as thousands of police and soldiers grabbed them and forced them into vans.

AFP journalists saw at least 700 members of the group trucked away as some 20 police vans roamed the square, while thousands of Chinese and overseas tourists looked on.

Falungong followers said the protests had begun on New Year's Eve and resumed early Monday, suggesting the number arrested could be significantly

higher.

At one point Monday morning police were seen grabbing a protester at a rate of one every two minutes.

The main demonstration appeared to have started just after 10:00 am (0200 GMT) when about four groups of Falungong members, positioned at different points across the vast esplanade, suddenly started shouting slogans.

They threw leaflets protesting Beijing's ban into the air, and unfurled red and yellow banners with Falungong written on them.

Many of the sect members were thrown to the ground and kicked in the face, before being dragged away. At least one woman had blood pouring from her head, but the police made no effort to help her, as cleaners moved in to swiftly wash away the pool of blood.

Four more killed in West Bank as peace hopes falter again

JERUSALEM, Jan 1: Four more deaths in the Palestinian territories, including that of a 12-year-old boy, ushered in the new year in the Middle East with scant prospect of a US peace plan getting off the ground, reports AFP.

Moaz Wahdan died in Ali hospital in Hebron where he had been taken Sunday after being caught up in a gunbattle between Israelis and Palestinians.

Two Palestinian policemen also died in Tulkarem in the northern West Bank, where an official of Palestinian leader Yasser Aarafat's Fatah movement was killed Sunday, allegedly in an assassination by the Israeli army.

Hospital officials said the bodies of Tareq Ibrahim Kato, 30, and Mwataz al-Sruji, 37, were unclothed and showed signs of torture.

The head of West Bank Palestinian hospital services, Musa Abu Hmeid, told AFP the two men's hands had been mutilated and they had apparently been summarily executed.

An Israeli military spokesman professed ignorance of how the men died, saying only that there had been heavy exchanges of fire overnight in the area.

The fourth death was that of a Palestinian man killed in an Arab village near Jerusalem in a drive-by shooting blamed by hospital officials on Jewish settlers.

It came just one day after an extremist settler and his wife, Binyamin Zeev Kahane and his wife Talia, died when their car was ambushed near their West Bank settlement.

At the Kahanes' funeral in Jerusalem late Sunday angry mourners vowing revenge attacked Arabs and smash stores.

The four latest deaths brought the toll to 366, mainly Palestinians, since the intifada, or uprising against Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, started September 28. Thousands more have been wounded.

The killings came as both sides prepared to welcome European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana on a mission aimed at breathing life into the floundering peace process.

Through the EU special representative for the Middle East, Miguel Angel Moratinos, he will make direct contact with the protagonists to assess their positions as to the proposals put forward by US President Bill Clinton," French foreign ministry spokesman Bernard Valero said in Paris Sunday.

Valero said the EU was determined to convince the Israelis and Palestinians to reach a negotiated peace, and that the outgoing French presidency of the community was in regular contact with its Swedish successors on the subject.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said on television late Sunday he wanted to achieve a "civilised divorce" with the Palestinians by means of a peace agreement.

"In the framework of an agreement it will be a civilised divorce, and much more painful if we do not reach an accord," he warned.

"Finally, we want to arrive at a physical separation from the Palestinians, which will enable us to live in our country and them in

theirs," he said.

Barak warned earlier Sunday that increased violence was likely if the Palestinians rejected the Clinton framework, which would theoretically give them all the Gaza Strip and 90 per cent of the West Bank, as well as some areas of Jerusalem, but they would have to renounce the right of return of 3.7 million refugees, many of whom fled Israel on its creation in 1948.

The Israeli government has told Clinton it accepts his plan in principle, but Barak repeated Sunday that he would not sign any accord giving the Palestinians sovereignty over east Jerusalem's mosque compound, which is sacred to Muslims but also sits on top of Judaism's holiest site.

The Palestinians have not responded officially to Clinton's proposals, saying more clarification is needed.

Arafat, who was in Egypt Monday for talks with President Hosni Mubarak, said in Tunis Sunday he wanted to go to Washington to discuss the plan further with the US president.

But he described the question of refugees and the al-Aqsa mosque, Islam's third holiest site, as fundamental.

Clinton and Barak want to stitch up an accord before Clinton steps down on January 20 and Barak faces prime ministerial elections on February 6, which he is forecast to lose to right-winger Ariel Sharon.

Sharon has said that if he is elected he will not recognise any deal.

US signs treaty on war crimes tribunals

WASHINGTON, Jan 1: Acting on a last-minute decision by President Bill Clinton, the United States signed a treaty creating the world's first permanent international war crimes tribunal to bring to justice people accused of crimes against humanity, reports AP.

Clinton said the decision to sign, taken with some reservations, builds on US support for justice and individual accountability dating to American involvement in the Nuremberg tribunals that brought Nazi war criminals to justice after World War II.

"Our action today sustains that tradition of moral leadership," he said on Sunday.

The treaty should not be submitted to the Senate for ratification until certain concerns are met, he said.

"I believe that a properly constituted and structured International Criminal Court would make a profound contribution in deterring egregious human rights abuses worldwide..." the president said in a statement issued at the White House.

The treaty must be ratified by the Senate before US participation in the tribunal becomes final. Fierce opposition to its terms is expected from conservatives led by Sen. Jesse Helms. The North Carolina Republican angrily responded Sunday that "this decision will not stand."

David J Scheffer, the US ambassador-at-large for war crimes issues, signed the treaty on behalf of the United States a few hours after Clinton

authorized him to do so.

Sunday was the deadline for countries to sign on to the international criminal court treaty and transmit it to United Nations headquarters in New York. After Sunday, ratification is the only way a government can express support for the treaty or associate itself with it.

The court would be the first permanent institution created specifically to try charges of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity. At present the United Nations has two specifically targeted and temporary war crimes courts in operation. One deals with suspects from the Bosnia-Herzegovina civil war of the early 1990s and the other with people implicated in atrocities during unrest in Rwanda in 1994.

Treaty supporters contend that a permanent international war crimes court is "the missing link" in the global legal system and say that over the past half century there have been many instances of war crimes and crimes against humanity that have gone unpunished.

For example, supporters note that no one has ever been held accountable for the alleged genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s when an estimated 2 million people were killed by the Khmer Rouge or for killings in such other countries as Mozambique, Liberia and El Salvador.

Moscow rings in New Year with new anthem

MOSCOW, Jan 1: Thousands of Russians thronged Red Square to ring in the New Year to the stirring tones of the new national anthem, played for the first time on the stroke of midnight, reports AFP.

The crowd warmly welcomed the new anthem, a revised version of the old Soviet-era anthem, but with new post-Communist lyrics.

President Vladimir Putin, who came to office exactly a year ago, spoke of the hopes of the Russian people for 2001.

"Already a year has gone by, a year of both joy and tragedy, a year of difficult decisions, but at the end of the day, that which seemed practically impossible a short time ago, has become reality," Putin said in a broadcast to the nation, which was also carried on a giant screen on Red Square.

"We can see the appearance of important elements for our stability, and these elements are very precious for politics, the economy and for each one of us," he said.

Gulf Arab leaders forge joint defence pact

MANAMA, Jan 1: Gulf Arab leaders forged a joint defence pact against external aggression and approved monetary unification in principle at a summit which ended here Sunday, reports AFP.

But they rejected moves to speed up a customs union needed to conclude an accord with the EU, according to the six-strong Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit's final declaration.

They also invited the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to "prove its peaceful intentions towards its neighbours," especially Kuwait, which Baghdad occupied from August 1990 to February 1991.

The rulers of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates also threw their full weight behind the three-month Palestinian intifada, or uprising, against Israeli occupation.

The declaration called for a "comprehensive dialogue" between Iraq and the United Nations, to examine all pending issues "with a view to a lifting of sanctions" imposed on Iraq a decade ago.

The GCC rulers expressed readiness to take part in any humanitarian initiative aimed at easing the "suffering of the brotherly Iraqi people" and to "work for the end of these sufferings in the framework of the UN resolutions."

The declaration also assured Abu Dhabi of council support for its "right" to three Gulf islands occupied by Iran in 1971, stressing the "full sovereignty of the UAE over the islands, an integral part of the Emirates."

They charged GCC foreign ministers with examining "all possible peaceful ways of allowing the UAE to regain the three islands," which Iran says are historically part of its territory.

The Gulf leaders, who will meet next in Muscat in December 2001, signed a joint defence pact that "commits the GCC member states to defend any member state victim of an external threat or danger."

A Gulf official told AFP the pact was "a great step on the road to the establishment of a common defence" between the six monarchies.

The pact was to have been signed in November

1999, but GCC defence ministers, then meeting in Dubai, broke up without putting their names to any agreement.

The GCC has approved a 70 million-dollar telecommunications project to link the military headquarters of all six countries but has yet to implement the plan, and is also examining a radar network project worth 88 million dollars.

The countries already have a joint defence force called Peninsula Shield, which chiefs of staff last month considered raising the size of from 5,000 to 22,000 troops.

The force, created in 1986, is headquartered in Saudi Arabia, but it did not intervene when Iraq overran Kuwait in a few hours in 1990.

The oil-rich Gulf monarchies have signed defence pacts with Western powers and have granted US and British forces military facilities to enforce the embargo and no-fly zone imposed on Iraq.

On the Palestinian issue, the GCC urged the international community to offer "protection to the Palestinian people in the face of Israeli aggression."

It expressed "confidence in the Palestinian negotiators" working in the framework of a US-sponsored Mideast peace plan, calling for Israel's withdrawal from all occupied territories.

The GCC, which accounts for 45 percent of the world's oil reserves and provides around 20 percent of the world's crude, also vowed to "take all the necessary measures to ensure (oil) market stability" by backing OPEC production cuts at the cartel's ministerial meeting in Vienna on January 17.

The summit approved the principle of monetary union, which a participant said would begin with linking their respective currencies to the US dollar.

All the currencies use the dollar as a reference except the Kuwaiti dinar, which is linked to a basket of half-a-dozen different currencies.

No date has been set for the move.

Bahrain's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohamed bin Mubarak al-Khalifa meanwhile told journalists that plans to bring forward a customs union from 2005 to 2003 had been shelved.