

### Mahathir arrives in Myanmar

YANGON, Jan 3: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad arrived here today amid an international push for Myanmar's ruling generals to launch an historic dialogue with the opposition led by Aung San Suu Kyi, reports AFP.

Efforts to achieve reconciliation in the military-run country have been spearheaded by Malaysian diplomat Razali Ismail who was appointed UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's special envoy to Myanmar last April.

Razali is due to arrive in the capital Yangon Friday for his third mission to Myanmar since taking up the post.

The visits by the two Malaysians come as the international community intensifies efforts to break the decade-long political stalemate in Myanmar.

Mahathir is to meet with Senior General Than Shwe, the chairman of the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), later Wednesday for talks expected to touch on a range of bilateral and regional issues.

In an editorial Wednesday, The Nation daily in Bangkok expressed hope that Malaysia, a "loyal friend" to Myanmar over the past few years, could play a key role in breaking the impasse.

"Mahathir can prove that he can make a difference in Burma, or at least encourage the junta to adopt economic reforms and engage the outside world," it said.

"It is not known just how far he would go to urge the junta to jump-start a political dialogue with the opposition ... but this effort is at the top of Razali's agenda."

Mahathir last visited Myanmar in March 1998, accompanied by his foreign minister who was permitted to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi.

This time his delegation includes foreign ministry secretary-general Abdul Kadir Mohamed, but there are no plans for him to see the Nobel peace laureate who has been under house arrest since September.

After meetings in Yangon Wednesday, Mahathir is to travel to the Myanmar-Thai border to visit joint venture projects and explore opportunities in the fisheries, timber and mining sectors for Malaysian companies.

On the eve of Mahathir's departure, Malaysia's opposition party pressed the premier to use his visit to urge Myanmar's military junta to bring about political reforms.

Opposition lawmakers said the situation in Myanmar had not improved since it was admitted into the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) four years ago, with Malaysia as its main sponsor.

### 3 former rebels shot dead in Assam

GUWAHATI, India, Jan 3: Separatist rebels in India's northeastern state of Assam shot dead three of their former comrades who had surrendered to the authorities, police said today, reports AFP.

A police spokesman said heavily armed members of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) attacked a vehicle carrying four surrendered ULFA militants late Tuesday night in western Assam's Nalbari district.

"The surrendered militants were returning from their farm when a group of ULFA rebels ambushed their vehicle and fired indiscriminately with automatic weapons, killing three on the spot and seriously injuring another", the spokesman told AFP by telephone from Nalbari.

The militants later escaped under the cover of darkness.

The surrendered militants, after laying down their arms last year, had set up a farm with government funding as part of a special rehabilitation package.

More than 3,000 ULFA militants have surrendered in the past three years, during which period at least 50 have been shot dead.

# International

## Arafat to intensify efforts to end violence: White House

### Israel shells Lebanon in response to mortar attack

WASHINGTON, Jan 3: The White House said late Tuesday that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had agreed to 'intensify efforts' to end violence in the Middle East and to resume cooperation on this with the Israeli authorities, reports AFP.

And in two meetings with Arafat Tuesday, US President Bill Clinton had provided Arafat with clarifications on his latest peace proposals, White House spokesman Jake Sievert said.

"Chairman Arafat specifically agreed to intensify efforts to end or stop -- reduce what they can -- the acts of violence, particularly shootings, to arrest those responsible for the acts of violence, and to resume immediately security cooperation ... to combat terrorism," White House spokesman Jake Sievert said.

"It will be very difficult to conclude agreement on more sensitive political issues while there is an atmosphere of violence," the spokesman said. "It will be very important that the commitments that were made get translated into action on the ground that will bear some fruit."

Clinton and Arafat held two meetings the White House Tuesday to discuss the US peace proposals presented on December 23.

Arafat was expected to leave Washington "fairly early" Wednesday, Sievert said.

The meetings Tuesday had been "productive" and "useful," the spokesman said.

Clinton had provided Arafat with clarifications of US peace proposals presented to Palestinian and Israeli negotiators in Washington on December 23. "The president answered question that they had, he offered explanations of those parameters," Sievert said.

According to Israeli and Palestinian versions of Clinton's framework peace proposals, all of the Gaza Strip and more than 90 percent of the West Bank would be restored to the Palestinians.

Sievert added that Clinton would return to work on his peace effort early Wednesday, consulting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak by telephone, and

also talking to other leaders in the region.

It was not excluded that US officials may talk with Arafat before his departure from Washington, he said.

The second meeting between the two leaders, which broke up at 10:45 pm (0945 BST), lasted about an hour, according to White House officials.

Meanwhile, another report from Kiryat Shmona, Lebanon, says: Mortar bombs fired from southern Lebanon landed near a military post in northern Israel early today, triggering a response from Israeli gunners, correspondents said.

Lebanese police said more than 50 Israeli tank and artillery shells rained down on the hamlet of Bastara near the disputed Shebaa farms area in an hour-long bombardment.

Israeli troops captured the Shebaa farms from Syria in 1967 and still hold them, though Beirut now says they are Lebanese territory and should have been evacuated by the Israelis when they withdrew from southern Lebanon in May after 22

years of occupation.

Lebanese goatherd Qassem Zahra told AFP by telephone that a dozen shells had fallen around his farm, killing several animals.

A helicopter and a pilotless reconnaissance drone had flown over the area before the bombardment, the heaviest since Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas captured three Israeli soldiers in a raid on the Shebaa farms in October.

On Tuesday an Israeli civilian working for the army was badly wounded, apparently by a sniper firing from across the border, an Israeli military source said.

It was not immediately known who fired the five mortar bombs, and Lebanese security forces said they were hunting those responsible, said to have been travelling in a blue 1975 Mercedes.

Nearly 200 police and troops were scouring the roads in the area in the search for the car, Lebanese police said.

An official said it was not the work of the Hezbollah, adding that the mortar attack was "contrary to Lebanese policy."



**Palestinian Leader Yasser Arafat (C) arrives at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland on Tuesday. Arafat met US President Bill Clinton to discuss the latest US proposals for Middle East peace with Israel.**

## Estrada stashed away \$ 40m: Prosecutors

MANILA, Jan 3: President Joseph Estrada has as much as two billion pesos (40 million dollars) stashed in several secret bank accounts, a leading prosecutor in the embattled leader's corruption trial claimed today, reports AFP.

"We will prove that he has two billion pesos and this is illegitimate," congressman Joker Arroyo, a leading prosecutor in the Senate trial, said in a local radio interview.

Prosecutors had previously claimed Estrada had secretly kept about 1.2 billion pesos in the bank, allegedly proceeds from illegal activities.

The president has been impeached by the House of Representatives on charges of bribery, corruption, betrayal of public trust and culpable violation of the constitution.

If convicted by the Senate, he would automatically be removed from office.

The political opposition has united with leftist activists, the Roman Catholic church and

business groups to demand Estrada resign.

Arroyo said Estrada hid the vast sum in the Equitable PCI Bank, a senior official of which testified earlier at the trial that she saw the president sign a false name on a trust account while in the presidential office in February last year.

Arroyo said that aside from the trust account, there were checking and savings accounts which the prosecution would detail later.

Prosecutors have been trying to link the Equitable PCI Bank accounts to allegations Estrada received huge bribes from bosses of illegal gambling rackets and skimmed off millions of dollars in government funds.

These were used to fund a lavish lifestyle for himself and numerous mistresses, they allege.

But Estrada's lawyers Wednesday shrugged off other testimony that his friends tried to cover up the alleged secret bank accounts.

Defence lawyer Raul Daza denied his client had ever tried to hide any bank transactions.

"This is clear: it is not a cover-up," Daza said in a radio interview.

He said the prosecution was using the trial "to hurt the president so there will be pressure on the president to resign" even if the evidence did not warrant his removal.

"What Congressman Arroyo keeps on saying, again and again, is that this is not a judicial trial, this is a political trial. For them, this is politics," Daza charged.

Estrada's acting press secretary Mike Toledo said the public must await the rebuttal by the defence and not jump to conclusions on whether the president was guilty of the charges.

"There are always two sides of a coin, there are always two versions of a story, what you are hearing is the version of the prosecution," he said.



**Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) greets Natsagiin Bagabandi, President of Mongolia, during a welcome ceremony at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi yesterday. Natsagiin is in India for a five-day official visit.**

## BRIEFLY

### Iranian plane skids off runway:

An Iran Air plane carrying 150 passengers skidded off a runway as it was about to take off Tuesday after its tyres burst, but nobody was injured in the incident, the official IRNA news agency said, AFP reports from Tehran.

It said the Russian-made Tupolev was taking off from the Persian Gulf island of Kish when the tyres blew, sending the plane careering off the takeoff runway. The plane had been headed to Tehran. All the passengers emerged safely and were later booked on other flights to the capital, it said.

### 3 die in Siberian gas explosion:

Three people died and seven were injured in a gas explosion in an apartment block in southwestern Siberia Wednesday, Moscow Echo radio reported, citing the local emergencies ministry, AFP reports from Moscow.

The head of the regional emergencies centre, Viktor Karimov, told the radio station that two floors of the three-storey building had collapsed in the accident, which killed an elderly couple and a middle-aged woman.

### Fire in HK business centre:

A fire broke out Wednesday on the top floors of a high-rise commercial building in Hong Kong's financial centre of Central, bringing traffic to a standstill, a government spokeswoman said, reports AFP from Hong Kong.

The blaze started on the rooftop of the 20-storey Melbourne Plaza shortly after lunch, she said. Later, a spokeswoman said the fire had been extinguished and that no one had been injured and workers had been allowed to return to the building.

## Bush selects Democrat for his Cabinet

AUSTIN, Jan 3: President-elect George W Bush plucked a Democrat from the Clinton administration to go with two conservative Republicans as he completed his Cabinet picks, two and half weeks before his inauguration, reports AP.

Bush named Commerce Secretary Norman Y Mineta to head the Department of Transportation, just-defeated Sen. Spencer Abraham of Michigan to be energy secretary and Linda Chavez, who served as direct of the civil rights commission under President Ronald Reagan, to be secretary of labour.

Bush had pledged to select a Democrat for his Cabinet. "This man is perfectly suited for the job," Bush said at a news conference announcing the trio of nominations. "It's also important to send a signal that this is an administration that recognizes talent when it sees it, regardless of political party."

Mineta, 69, reaffirmed his allegiance to his party, declaring at the news conference: "I am a Democrat with both a small 'd' and a large one."

But with the election over, Mineta said, it is time to move from campaigning to governing.

Mineta set conditions for accepting the job, a White House official said, insisting he would not campaign for Republicans and wanted to choose his own subordinates.

The former California congressman had campaigned for Democrat Al Gore and had questioned Bush's forthrightness following recent revelations of a drunk driving arrest in Maine dating back to 1976.

"That's something he has to answer, especially since he's been bashing Gore on that same issue" of truthfulness, Mineta told the San Jose Mercury News days before the election. "It turns out he's not been as forthright."

Mineta would claim a rare place in American history, apparently becoming the first Cabinet officer to jump straight from the administration of one party to the succeeding administration of another.

Edwin Stanton served as attorney general in the administration of President James Buchanan, a Democrat, and later was war secretary for Buchanan's successor, Republican President Abraham Lincoln.

## India's combat aircraft set for maiden flight

BANGALORE, India, Jan 3: India is set to test fly its long-awaited Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) within a "couple of days," a defence official said today, reports AFP.

Development of the Indian-made multi-role combat aircraft, first sanctioned in 1983, has been subject to endless delays and has already cost somewhere in the region of 25 billion rupees (\$43 million dollars).

"The date has not been finalised but the aircraft will take wing very soon ... in a couple of days," an official at the Aeronautical Development Agency based in Bangalore told AFP.

"It is a top management decision. The good weather has been playing truant for the last two days. As it clears and conditions are suitable the aircraft will take off. In fact the aircraft has already had two taxi runs," he said.

The aircraft has a wing span of 8.2 metres (27 feet) with a height of 4.4 metres (14.5 feet) and is 13.2 metres (43.5 feet) in length.

It can carry seven weapon stations and has a provision for in-flight refuelling, as well as short take-off and landing capability.

A month ago, India's Defence



**This file picture dated April 14, 1998 shows a general view of the tens of thousands of Hindu devotees as they bath in India's most sacred river the Ganges during the yearly Maha Kumbh Mela festival in Hardwar. Tens of millions of Hindu pilgrims will begin converging on the northern India city of Allahabad next week for the climax of the Kumbh Mela, touted as one of the world's greatest gathering of mass humanity, which is held every 12 years.**

### Binary baby

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 3: A boy born on January 1 in southern Malaysia has been dubbed the country's "binary baby" because of his birth registration number, 010101-01-0101, a news report said today, reports DPA.

The Star daily carried a front-page picture of Mohamed Haziq Hilman and his delighted parents. "This is truly my lucky day," said the overjoyed father, Mohamad Helmy Abdul Hamid.

The first six number of the certificate by the National Registration Department mean the boy was born on January 1, 2001. The subsequent 01 is the code for Johore Baharu state. The remaining 0101 means he was the 101st baby born in Malaysia on Monday.

The Star said Malaysia's next binary baby would be born in the next century, on January 1, 2101.

## US passes law recognising Macau's status

HONG KONG, Jan 3: The United States Congress has passed a law establishing a clear legal framework for recognising Macau's special status under the "One Country, Two Systems" formula, a statement from the US Consulate said here today, reports AFP.

The statement said President Bill Clinton had signed a law containing the "United States-Macau Policy Act of 2000" on December 27 that acknowledged the commercial, social, cultural, legal and economic autonomy of the former Portuguese colony, which returned to Chinese rule in December 1999.

US Consul General Michael Klosson said the law recognised the importance of protecting basic freedoms and human rights which were fundamental to the "Special Administrative Region's autonomy and continued prosperity."

The Act has a similar purpose to the 1992 US-Hong Kong Policy Act, which established the framework in US law for treating Hong Kong as a distinct entity under Chinese sovereignty, following its handover to Chinese rule in July 1997.

The new legislation specifies the US should play an active role in maintaining Macau's prosperity and the mutually beneficial ties between the two regions.

### Russian poll

## Putin Person of the Year

MOSCOW, Jan 3: The sinking of the Kursk submarine and the return of hundreds more soldiers in bodybags from separatist Chechnya last year has failed to erode the popularity of President Vladimir Putin, a poll indicated on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

Putin received a winning 38 per cent of votes for Person of the Year in an annual poll, exactly the same proportion he won in last year's survey, said Yuri Levada, director of the All-Russia Opinion Polls Institute.

Press criticism of Putin's handling of the Kursk tragedy, in which 118 sailors died, and his failure to end the grinding Chechen conflict could not stop Putin trouncing the opposition; Bill Clinton and Russian Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov tied for a distant second place with four per cent each.

Deputy Prime Minister Valentina Matvienko was voted Woman of the Year with 16 per cent of the vote.

She was followed by "actresses, singers and so on", Levada said. "Women politicians are very rare, you just do not see them."

Terrorism, drug abuse and a growing AIDS problem were Russians' main fears for the next century, but 56 per cent of respondents said they expected 2001 to be better than last year.

# India braces for the greatest gathering on earth

ALLAHABAD, India, Jan 3: Tens of millions of Hindu pilgrims will begin converging on the northern India city of Allahabad next week for what is being touted as the world's greatest gathering of mass humanity, reports AFP.

At its peak, the 42-day Maha (Great) Kumbh Mela, which begins January 9, is expected to bring together upwards of 30 million pilgrims to the city where the holy Ganges and Yamuna rivers meet.

For the hordes of sadhus (holy men) and ordinary pilgrims who make the trip, the Kumbh Mela -- held every 12 years -- is an important opportunity to wash away their sins by bathing in the rivers' waters.

The Guinness Book of Records described the last Kumbh Mela in 1989, when 15 million people came together, as the 'greatest recorded number of human beings assembled with a common purpose.'

The timing of the pilgrimage, whose origins have been dated back to the Neolithic period, is dictated by planetary alignment.

The 2001 event has special significance, with an alignment of planets that will not be repeated for another 144 years.

For the duration of the event, millions of pilgrims live a crammed, spartan existence in tents and ashrams, eating basic vegetarian food and bathing daily.

At the top of the hierarchy are the sadhu sects, whose leaders set up special 'akhara' or compounds for their followers.

Amongst the sadhus, the most revered are the Nagas (the unclothed) -- dreadlocked, ash-covered ascetics who live in caves and forests, existing on herbs, roots and plants.

The Nagas will lead off the bathing ritual on January 24, the most auspicious date of the Kumbh Mela, when the crowd is expected to top the 30 million mark. The Nagas dominance has not always gone unchallenged.

There are accounts of large battles fought in the

17th and 18th centuries between the Nagas and other claimants to leadership in the procession.

Mark Twain, who attended the Kumbh Mela in 1895, remarked on the "unwavering faith" of the pilgrims who "plodded for months in heat to get here; worn, poor and hungry."

Since Twain's day, the numbers have swelled enormously, posing a huge logistical challenge to the organisers in terms of sanitary arrangements and setting up vast camps and communal kitchens.

There is also the constant fear of a stampede that could have appalling consequences.

Preparations, which began months ago, have included building 27 pontoon bridges spanning the Yamuna and Ganges to allow freedom of movement.

"We have tried to cover all possible snags and hope to provide a very peaceful and enjoyable time for the devotees," said Allahabad senior superintendent of police, P.K. Tiwari.

The event's chief health officer, G.R. Sharma, said a makeshift 100-bed hospital had been set up, together with a 24-hour emergency medical service.

The greatest potential danger will be the six main bathing days, when military precision will be needed to allow millions to take a purifying wash in the rivers.

"Assuming that a person will take three feet (one meter) of space, we can accommodate 25,000 people for a minute, after which the next group will take their dip," said a senior organising official at the site.

The coming Kumbh Mela also looks set to attract its fair share of controversy.

The 'Sant Sammelan' (Gathering of Sages) organised by the right-wing Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Forum) on January 19 plans to set a date for the construction of a Hindu temple on the ruins of the Babri mosque, which was razed by Hindu zealots in the northern town of Ayodhya in 1992.