

International

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 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 Southeast 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.

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 Siewert 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 Siewert 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, Siewert 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 questions that they had, he offered explanations of those parameters," Siewert 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.

Siewert 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.

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.

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.



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.

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 ill-gotten," 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 racketeers and skimmed off millions of dollars in government funds.

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

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.

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 numbers 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 Bahru 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 Klossen 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 Matviyenko 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.

Bush selects Democrat for his Cabinet

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.

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 (\$4.3 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. If the aircraft has already had two taxi runs," he said.

The aircraft has a wing span of 8.2 meters (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

Minister George Fernandes told reporters that the LCA project was at a "critical point."

At the same time, a parliamentary panel on defence said the LCA would not be ready for serial production before 2015.

Military analysts say the entire project has proved a bottomless pit in terms of expenditure and that no government has shown the political courage to simply scrap its development.

"It's really a case of good money chasing bad money," said analyst Rahul Bedi of Jane's Defence Weekly.

Bedi said the military was hoping that an Indo-Russian deal signed last week for the licensed production of Russian Sukhoi fighter jets would give the LCA project a boost.

The three-billion-dollar deal envisages the production of some 140 Su-30MKI fighters over the next 17 years by India's largest aerospace company, Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, in Bangalore.

"The hope is that the Sukhoi technology can be incorporated in the LCA design," Bedi said.



This file picture dated April 14, 1998 shows a general view of the tens of thousands of Hindu devotees as they bathe in India's most sacred river the Ganges during the yearly Maha Kumbh Mela festival in Allahabad. Millions of Hindus will converge on the northern Indian 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.

-AFP photo

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 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.