

'Pak participation in Shanghai Five needs consensus'

BEIJING, Jan 4: China was non-committal today over a Pakistani request to join the Shanghai Five, a central Asian forum of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, reports AFP.

The China side has taken note of the wishes of the Pakistani side to participate in the Shanghai Five, but in taking on new members it requires a negotiated consensus among the five members," foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said.

The next meeting of the grouping, the sixth such meeting since being established in 1996, will return to Shanghai in May, after having met in each of the capitals of the five members in preceding years, he said.

Khmer Rouge trial law goes to senate

PHNOM PENH, Jan 4: Cambodia's newly-adopted draft law on bringing to trial Khmer Rouge leaders on charges of genocide will be sent to the Senate Friday for review, parliament president Prince Norodom Ranariddh said today, reports AFP.

"I will sign on the newly adopted Khmer Rouge law today and tomorrow we will have it sent to the Senate," Prince Ranariddh told reporters.

Successful test flight for Indian combat aircraft

BANGALORE, India, Jan 4: India today successfully test flew its long-delayed frontline Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), as the defence minister and top military brass looked on, reports AFP.

The multi-role combat aircraft -- in development since 1983 -- has been a long-cherished dream of India's air force chiefs who want to reduce the country's dependency on foreign imports.

The LCA took off from an airfield connected to the Bangalore-based aerospace company, Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, at 10:19 am (10:49 BST) and "was in the air for 17 minutes" an HAL official said.

Defence Minister George Fernandes, who watched from the ground, described the test flight as "a red letter day" for the Indian aeronautics industry.

"With this, India has joined a club of seven to eight nations which has the capability of making supersonic fighters," Fernandes told reporters.

Air Force chief Marshal A.Y. Tipnis, who observed the flight from one of two Mirage fighters which shadowed the LCA, called it an "historic milestone."

A statement by the Aeronautics Development Agency, which manufactured the aircraft, said the flight was successful and met all the test parameters.

"The purpose of the flight test programme was to validate a num-

ber of advanced technologies incorporated in the LCA. These include integrated avionics, fly-by-wire digital flight control systems and others," the statement said.

The fighter, whose development was partly delayed by US sanctions imposed after India's 1998 nuclear tests, can carry seven weapon stations and has a provision for in-flight refuelling.

Seventy percent of the air force's current fleet is made up of Soviet-era aircraft, while the remainder is a mixture of French and British planes.

An exuberant Fernandes spoke of a "day of triumph" for Indian scientists and technicians.

The defence minister admitted that in the past 50 years, the aeronautics industry had not received the attention it deserved and, as a result, had lost many promising engineers and technicians.

"I believe all this has changed today," he said.

"There is no looking back anymore as far as our aeronautics industry is concerned. There is only going forward," Fernandes said.

Analysts say the Indian Air Force is likely to test four prototypes in order to speed up the certification process, which requires a certain number of test flying hours to be notched up.

However, the LCA is not likely to begin serial production before 2015.

Some observers say the entire project, which has already cost somewhere in the region of 25 billion rupees (543 million dollars), has proved a bottomless pit in terms of expenditure, with successive governments lacking the political courage to simply scrap its development.

Air Marshal Tipnis admitted there had been a lot of concern over the delays in developing the LCA, but added that Thursday's test flight had answered the "non-believers."

"The pendulum of enthusiasm has swung from one of active scepticism to euphoria," Tipnis said, while agreeing that the induction of the new fighter was still a long way off.

"We have many more heights to be scaled and many more aeronautical achievements to be made ... to ensure that LCA will become a frontline fighter."

The military is hoping that an Indo-Russian deal signed last week for the licensed production of Russian Sukhoi fighter jets will give the LCA project a technical boost.

The three-billion-dollar deal envisages the production of some 140 Su-30MKI fighters over the next 17 years in HAL's Bangalore facility.

Rival parties clash in Calcutta: 80 injured

CALCUTTA, Jan 4: Communist activists have clashed with rival party supporters in India's eastern state of West Bengal, leaving more than 80 people injured, police said today, reports AFP.

The trouble began Wednesday evening when supporters of the state's ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) fired arrows at buses carrying workers of the rival Trinamool Congress (TMC), as they returned from a public meeting in the district of Midnapore.

District Police Superintendent Gaurav Dutta said the violence swiftly escalated as the two rival groups hurled bricks at each other, damaged vehicles and even torched some nearby houses.

More than 80 people, including two policemen, were injured.

TMC leader Mamata Banerjee, who is also the federal railways minister, was slightly injured when a brick hit her foot.

Tensions have been running high in Midnapore for some time, as the communists have made political inroads into the predominantly TMC constituency.

The two parties have been bitter rivals since the TMC was formed in 1998.

A protest against communist intimidation by TMC activists on Thursday again turned violent, as they stoned a local police station.

Hillary makes US political history

WASHINGTON, Jan 4: Hillary Rodham Clinton made US political history Wednesday, becoming the first presidential spouse in Congress when she was sworn in as a senator from New York, reports AFP.

Hillary enters the Congress fairly low on the seniority ladder, but she was one of the stars of the show as the 34 newly elected and re-elected senators were called in alphabetical order to take the oath of office.

Dressed in a bright turquoise pantsuit, Hillary easily stood out against her dark-suited colleagues.

US President Bill Clinton and daughter Chelsea held hands tightly as Hillary raised her right hand and swore to "uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States." They then burst into applause along with some 300 other visitors as she accepted her six-year term as a freshman senator in the 107th Congress.

Defeated presidential candidate and standing Vice President Al Gore presided over the ceremony. In the House of Representatives, 41 new members were to be sworn in to the 435-seat body.

On November 7, Hillary won a clear victory over her Republican opponent, Rick Lazio, to become one of two senators from the north-eastern state of New York, replacing Senate veteran Patrick Moynihan, who retired.

Hillary bought a house in Chappaqua, New York, in January 1999 -- just before announcing her



US President Bill Clinton and First Lady Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton attend a Senate swearing-in reception at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC, on Wednesday. Hillary was sworn in to the US Senate earlier in the day on Capitol Hill. --AFP photo

Senate candidacy -- and her residency status was an issue in the hotly contested campaign.

But New York's senior senator, Charles Schumer, said he was pleased with Hillary's victory.

"I think we're going to be a great team," he told reporters after the swearing-in ceremony. "Having an intelligent, dedicated, hard-working teammate will be really great."

"I'll do my best not to steal Hillary's limelight," he joked. Hillary's

role as first lady will end in 17 days, on January 20, when her husband steps down after two terms in office and Republican President-elect George W. Bush is inaugurated as the country's 43rd president.

In spite of repeated statements that she wishes to be treated as one among the 100 senators, Hillary is expected to rise up the political ladder.

BRIEFLY

Vajpayee to visit Vietnam:

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee will arrive in Vietnam on Sunday for a three-day official visit on the invitation of his Vietnamese counterpart Phan Van Khai, the foreign ministry here said Thursday, AFP reports from Hanoi.

7 Filipino rebels killed:

Seven Muslim separatists were killed in clashes with government troops on the main southern Philippine island of Mindanao, the military said Thursday, AFP reports from Zamboanga, Philippines.

Pakistan denies violating Kashmir ceasefire

ISLAMABAD, Jan 4: Pakistan has dismissed Indian allegations it violated a border ceasefire in divided Kashmir, saying New Delhi is clutching at straws to ease pressure for it to accept meaningful peace talks, reports AFP.

"Pakistan has not launched any attack on Indian posts along the Line of Control (LoC, the unofficial border)," military spokesman Major General Rashid Qureshi told the BBC late Wednesday.

"From our side firing has come to a complete halt."

Indian defence ministry sources on Wednesday told AFP Pakistani border guards opened fire on Indian posts in Kashmir, breaking a month's lull on the border across the disputed Himalayan territory.

They said the firing lasted up to 20 minutes in the Kathua region of the southern district of Jammu, within the Indian-administered zone of Kashmir, although the incident has not been officially

confirmed.

"(India's) Border Security Force in Kathua retaliated to the unprovoked firing from across the international border," the source in New Delhi said, adding that there were no casualties.

Pakistan has vowed to use maximum restraint along the tense border and has partially withdrawn its troops in response to an Indian ceasefire with Muslim militant troops.

Qureshi said India was under pressure to resolve the Kashmir issue through negotiations but "perhaps she is not prepared for it."

Baseless allegations against Pakistan could be a way to deflect some of the pressure for India to respond to Islamabad's repeated offers of a dialogue to end the two nuclear rivals' decades-old dispute over Kashmir, he said.

17 arrested for Manila bomb blasts

MANILA, Jan 4: Seventeen mostly Muslim men were detained today over a series of deadly bomb blasts that rocked the Philippine capital last weekend, military and police sources said, reports AFP.

The men, aged between 18 and 33 years, were seized in a pre-dawn raid in a suburb of Manila and are undergoing interrogation, the sources said, adding that three firearms had been confiscated from them.

National police spokesman Senior Superintendent Nicanor Bartolome declined to comment on the arrests but said that the near-simultaneous bombings that killed 17 people and injured nearly 100 others could have been triggered by cellular phones.

Earlier, government television said several suspects had been detained in relation to the five bomb blasts that went off in public places in Manila on Saturday. However it

gave no details.

The sources did not say which group the bombers belonged to.

Leftist protest groups charged that the detained men were going to be used as scapegoats for the bombings.

The groups said that as many as 21 Muslim men had been seized from suburbs of Manila but some of them had since been released.

Karapatan, a leftist group that was organising a legal defence for the Muslims, denied that those arrested were involved in the bombings and said their rights had been violated.

National police chief Panfilo Lacson said Thursday that "we have established the motive" for the bombings, adding that "definitely, this is not connected with the impeachment trial" of President Joseph Estrada in the Senate.

US immigration population exceeds 28 m

WASHINGTON, Jan 4: The number of immigrants living in the United States has more than tripled since 1970 to over 28 million -- the largest number in US history, according to a new study issued yesterday, reports Reuters.

The report by the Centre for Immigration Studies analyzed Census Bureau data collected last year. It found that 28.4 million immigrants now live in the United States accounting for 10.4 per cent

of the total population, the highest percentage in 70 years.

Immigration has emerged as a hot political issue in recent years. In California, voters in 1994 supported a proposition to deny health education and social services to illegal immigrants and their children, but it was struck down by the courts.

Most Republican and Democratic leaders currently support legal immigration but adamantly oppose the illegal influx of hundreds

of thousands of people each year across the US border with Mexico. However, efforts to beef up border controls have not proved successful.

"While immigration's impact continues to be the subject of intense national debate, there can be no doubt that the large number of immigrants now living in the United States represents an enormous challenge," said Steven Camarata, director of research at the Centre for Immigration Studies.

"With more than half of post-1970 immigrants and their US-born children living in or near poverty and one third having no health insurance, the situation for immigrant families is clearly precarious."

"With the economy slowing, the situation for immigrant families is likely to deteriorate dramatically and the costs of immigration to become glaringly apparent," Camarata said.

The data showed more than 1.2 million newcomers settle legally or illegally in the United States each year with the vast majority going to a few states, notably California, New York, Florida and Texas.

"These new data confirm what many Americans are seeing with their own eyes -- the United States is in the midst of the largest sustained wave of immigration in its history," said Camarata.

The 11.2 million immigrants who had arrived since 1990 and their 6.4 million children accounted for almost 70 per cent of US population growth over the decade.

The United States is now issuing 700,000 to 900,000 permanent residency visas each year but up to half a million more immigrants enter the country illegally.



US pop group "Destiny's Child" -- (from R-L): Michelle Williams, Bianca Knowles and Kelly Rowland -- pose after the announcement of the nominations for the 2001 Grammy Awards in Beverly Hills, CA, on Wednesday. The group received two nominations including Best R&B Performance By A Duo or Group with Vocal for "Say My Name." The awards will be presented

Violence claims nine lives in Indonesia

JAKARTA, Jan 4: Nine people were killed and three seriously wounded when villagers wielding machetes and home-made guns clashed on Indonesia's eastern holiday island of Lombok, police said today, reports AFP.

One man died late Wednesday and eight people were killed early Thursday in clashes between residents of two villages before riot police managed to contain the violence, police spokeswoman Tri Budi Pangastuti said.

The violence was triggered by an ambush by the villagers of Bongor on four people travelling from the nearby village of Parampuan on Wednesday, she said.

When they returned home, the four told what had happened prompting Parampuan villagers, armed with machetes and home-made guns, to retaliate the same day, attacking Bongor and killing one man, identified as Helmi.

The violence continued

unabated on Thursday, although there were no immediate details about how the other eight died, or which village they were from.

The clashes erupted 11 kilometres from the coastal resort area of Senggigi and five kilometres from the provincial capital of Mataram. Neither town was affected.

Early last month one person was killed in clashes between residents of the same two villages.

The confrontation erupted after Bongor villagers accused a resident of Parampuan of stealing a radio communications unit belonging to a Bongor neighbourhood security guard.

But hotel staff said the latest violence had not affected tourists on Lombok. Workers at the Sheraton and Oberoi hotels said they had not even heard of the village fight. Lovers and those seeking the peace of its palm-lined white sand beaches.