

## International

Amnesty calls for inquiry into killings in Assam

NEW DELHI, Jan 5: Amnesty International called today for an independent inquiry into a recent wave of civilian massacres in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, in which at least 120 people have died, reports AFP.

"In the light of the escalating violence and conflicting claims about who has carried out the killings, the government must exercise some control over this dire situation," the London-based rights group said in a statement.

"The government must initiate impartial and independent investigations to reveal the perpetrators and bring them to justice."

The killings, which came in November and December last year, are being blamed on several insurgent groups fighting for either secession or greater autonomy.

The Assam government has squarely blamed the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) for targeting settlers from other Indian states and neighbouring Nepal and Bhutan.

The ULFA, however, has denied responsibility for the attacks.

"We are fighting for an independent homeland. We are not involved in killing of any Hindu-speaking people or minorities in Assam," Paresh Baruah, military chief of the ULFA said recently.

"The killings are being master-minded by the government themselves and we have got evidence to prove that," Baruah said.

Separatist militants also accuse the federal government of flooding Assam with outsiders and neglecting the local economy.

## US extends sanctions on Libya

WASHINGTON, Jan 5: US President Bill Clinton informed Congress Thursday of his decision to extend for a further six months US economic sanctions slapped on Libya some 15 years ago, reports AFP.

Clinton stated that despite Libya handing over for trial two suspects in the 1988 bombing of a Pan-Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, US concerns persist.

"There are still concerns about the Libyan government's support for terrorist activities," he said in a written statement made public by the White House.

"The crisis between the United States and Libya that led to the declaration on January 7, 1986, of a national emergency has not been resolved," Clinton said.

The United Nations suspended its own sanctions against Libya in 1999, after the nation gave up the two Lockerbie bombing suspects.

## Clinton to be given N-test ban report

WASHINGTON, Jan 5: A study conducted by retired Gen. John Shalikashvili urging that the United States ratify the nuclear test ban treaty will be presented to President Bill Clinton on Friday, according to an administration official, reports AP.

Clinton had requested the assessment by Shalikashvili, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, after Senate Republicans rejected the plan in 1999.

The report finds "it is in the interest of the United States to sign the treaty," said the administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

President-elect Bush has opposed the pact, saying it was unenforceable, though his top advisers have been divided. Secretary of State-designate Colin Powell, himself a former Joint Chiefs chairman, supported it while Bush's pick for defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, has said he is against it.

Shalikashvili's report recommends measures to build support for the treaty, including greater efforts to maintain in United States nuclear arsenal and a joint review by the Senate and administration every 10 years, The New York Times and the Washington Post reported in Friday editions.

## 3 ex-customs officials to die for smuggling in China

BEIJING, Jan 5: Three former Chinese customs officials have been sentenced to death for smuggling almost dls 89 million worth of goods as the government continues a crackdown on rampant corruption, state media and officials said, reports AP.

The three were part of a smuggling ring in the southern city of Taishan that also cheated government coffers out of more than dls 21 million in lost customs duties, Xinhua News Agency said late Thursday.

The Intermediate Peoples Court in the nearby city of Jiangmen sentenced Fu Zhijian and Huang Guoliu to death and handed a suspended death sentence to Hu Yingcong, Xinhua said.

Fu was in charge of the customs office in Taishan, a city in Guangdong province near two of China's busiest ports, Hong Kong and Guangzhou. The court official said Fu and the others relied on falsified documents to smuggle paper, steel and television parts.

## Israel will never agree to refugees' return: Barak

LONDON, Jan 5: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak insisted Thursday that his country would never agree to the return of millions of Palestinians who were forced from their homes in what is now Israel, reports AFP.

In an interview with BBC television, he warned that if Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat demanded a right of return for refugees to Israel as a part of a permanent agreement, "it means he doesn't want peace."

"Insisting on (a) right of return is putting a question mark on the very raison d'être of Israel," he said.

"We will never agree to it no matter who comes to this place." Barak, who faces re-election next month, told the BBC that the alternative to peace was an infinite cycle of violence between Israel and Arab nations.

Under the Clinton proposals,

the refugees' right of return, reaffirmed by Arab foreign ministers at a meeting Thursday in Cairo, is one of the key obstacles to securing a lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Barak said that without a deal, Israel would have to disengage itself from the Palestinian territories, creating a security zone along the River Jordan and taking steps to protect its settlements.

Arafat earlier said he was still hoping for a US-mediated peace agreement with Israel before President Bill Clinton leaves office on January 20.

Barak faces an uphill re-election fight on February 6 against right-winger Ariel Sharon, and a peace deal with the Palestinians could be his only chance of victory.

Under the Clinton proposals,

Palestinians would gain sovereignty over the Temple Mount's neighbouring mosque compound, Islam's third holiest shrine, as well as control of 95 percent of the West Bank and all of the Gaza Strip, in exchange for renouncing the right of 3.7 million refugees to return to Israel proper, which they left in the wake of the 1948 war for independence.

Arafat gave his conditional acceptance to the US plan Tuesday, after talks with Clinton.

Barak said Israel had to accept "the fact that there is another side, the Palestinians have their own suffering, their own problem," but "afterwards it will be more healthy and the future will be better."

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In Islamabad, Pakistan's

## Indo-Pak dialogue soon, says Kashmir chief minister

NEW DELHI, Jan 5: The chief minister of Indian-administered Kashmir Farooq Abdullah said today that India and Pakistan would soon restart talks to resolve their differences on the region, reports AFP.

The time is coming when negotiations between India and Pakistan will start," Abdullah told reporters here.

"I can't say when it will happen, but it will happen soon," he said.

Abdullah said he based his optimism on the fact that Islamabad had accepted New Delhi's unilateral Ramadan ceasefire against Muslim militants, implemented in Indian Kashmir on November 28.

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of Islamabad's intentions for "better relations," the chief minister said.

New Delhi extended the ceasefire by another four weeks on December 20.

Abdullah's remarks on the possible resumption of talks between New Delhi and Islamabad came four days after Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said the atmosphere was not yet "conducive" for a bilateral dialogue.

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