

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 Hindi-speaking people or minorities in Assam," Parash Baruah, military chief of the ULFA said recently.

"The killings are being masterminded 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 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 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 Guolin 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 the 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.

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-mediate 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 per cent 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".

Justice gets death threat over Estrada trial

MANILA, Jan 5: Philippine Supreme Court chief justice Hilario Davide Friday read out a death threat sent to him for presiding over the corruption trial of President Joseph Estrada, reports AFP.

He said the letter, written on stationery from the office of Vice President Gloria Arroyo, warned him: "We the Filipino people find you guilty for the crime of betrayal of public trust."

"Therefore you are hereby sentenced to suffer the penalty of death, together with your family and relatives," Davide read from the letter.

He added the preceding paragraphs accused him of being anti-Estrada, and said he did not believe the letter had come from

the vice-president's office.

He told the court he would not be scared off and would continue to perform his duty, "even if it would call for the sacrifice of my own life."

Arroyo now leads an opposition coalition seeking to have Estrada removed on charges of receiving bribes from gambling bosses, skimming off government funds and protecting friends from government regulators.

Estrada was impeached by the House of Representatives and is facing trial in Senate. If found guilty he would be forced out of office.

Davide has won praise for his even-handed conduct of the trial.

Fighting in Aceh leaves 6 dead

JAKARTA, Jan 5: Fighting between government troops and separatist rebels in Indonesia's violence-wracked Aceh province has left at least six people dead, police and hospital workers said today, reports AP.

The latest bloodshed comes just days before negotiators for the two sides are due to meet in Switzerland for a final round of peace talks before a truce expires on Jan 15.

Some Cabinet ministers and hardline army generals are pressing President Abdurrahman Wahid to launch

a major crackdown against the insurgents, and rebel leaders have warned of civil war if the truce is not extended. The two sides are tentatively scheduled to meet on Monday in Geneva.

The separatist Free Aceh Movement has been waging a low-level insurgency against Indonesian rule for the past 26 years. At least 6,000 people have been killed in the past decade in the region on the northern tip of Sumatra island.

Since the ceasefire came into effect in June last year, at least 520 people have died.



Trinamool Congress Party chief Mamata Banerjee was injured during clashes between CPI-M and Trinamool Congress Party workers at Keshupur, some 150 Km south of Calcutta on Thursday. Trinomool Congress Party called a 12-hour general strike in the state yesterday to protest the attack on their leader. Over 80 people have been injured so far in clashes in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. --AFP photo

Saddam appears for 2nd time on Iraqi TV in two days

BAGHDAD, Jan 5: President Saddam Hussein appeared on Iraqi television for a second time in two days Thursday, apparently trying to dispel rumors he had suffered a stroke, reports AP.

He was shown smoking a cigar while chatting to a mostly Egyptian group that included two well-known entertainers, theater actor Mohammed Sobhi and Raghdha, a Syrian film star who lives in Egypt and uses only one name.

"Saddam loves his nation, but he loves Egypt especially because he has lived in Egypt," television viewers heard the president say.

Saddam lived in Egypt for four years after taking part in a failed attempt to assassinate Iraqi Prime Minister Abdel Karim Qassim in 1959.

On Wednesday, an Iraqi government spokesman dismissed a report from an Iraqi exile group in Syria that Saddam, 63, had suffered a stroke on Sunday.

Later Wednesday, state television showed Saddam chairing a Cabinet meeting.

An Iraqi dissident in London, Mowaffak Al-Rubaie, cast doubt on the Cabinet appearance, saying it could have been doc-

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.

Pakistan's subsequent withdrawal of troops from along the Line of Control dividing Indian and Pakistani administered Kashmir was another indication

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.

According to Abdullah, the "wider dimensions" of the ceasefire included people on both sides of the Indo-Pakistan border being able to go back to farming.

Pakistan was on the whole "trying their best" to improve relations, Abdullah said, but noted that Islamabad had its own "difficulties" too.

In Islamabad, Pakistan's

National Security Council (NSC) on Thursday discussed the prospect of talks with India on their thorny dispute over Kashmir and voiced "optimism" for the start of a peace process.

The top policy-making body comprising military chiefs and key cabinet ministers reviewed the general security situation in the region with a "special focus" on Kashmir, an official statement said.

The meeting, chaired by military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, discussed the forthcoming visit here of a delegation from the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), Kashmir's main separatist alliance.

The APHC team from the Indian-administered part of the divided Himalayan state is expected to arrive here in the middle of this month for talks with the government on Kash-

mir, the statement said.

The NSC "expressed optimism that their (APHC delegation's) visit would lend impetus to a tripartite dialogue process on the issue of Kashmir," involving Pakistan, India and Kashmiris.

"We have taken due note of the statements that have been made in India, especially by the prime minister of India (Atal Behari Vajpayee) on New Year's eve," Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar said after the NSC meeting.

"We are impressed by what Mr. Vajpayee has said and we hope that in the near future the dialogue will begin and we will embark upon purposeful negotiations with India on the root cause of the tensions that have existed between the two countries."

Y'slav Foreign Minister opens door for Milosevic tribunal

WASHINGTON, Jan 5: Yugoslav Foreign Minister Goran Svilanovic appeared to open the door Thursday for Slobodan Milosevic to be tried on war crimes charges by an international tribunal, as long as the court sat on Yugoslav soil, reports AFP.

Svilanovic suggested that Belgrade, which has balked at extraditing Milosevic to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague, could accept an international component in trial that took place in Serbia.

"As far as the Hague tribunal cooperation is concerned ... there are possibilities to fully cooperate with the tribunal and to prosecute all indicted personalities in cooperation with the tribunal on the territory of the (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia)," Svilanovic told reporters after meeting US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

"This is the idea we have now, but I look forward to meeting with (chief ICTY prosecutor Carla) del Ponte in Belgrade where we can go into a more detailed discussion of this issue," he said.

Svilanovic did not elaborate on the proposal and Albright -- one of the strongest proponents of sending Milosevic to the tribunal -- offered no objection to it, though she did say it was important that their be an interna-

tional component to any trial. "Crimes against the international community require international justice," Albright said.

The ICTY has indicted Milosevic, who was deposed in a popular uprising in October, along with four top allies for alleged war crimes committed in Kosovo during the 1998 ethnic cleansing campaign.

However, Belgrade's new authorities, led by Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica, have insisted that Milosevic be tried at home, citing constitutional obstacles for his extradition to the Hague.

Earlier Thursday, Serbian Education Minister Gaso Knezevic said Milosevic would receive the strongest sentence possible if tried in his homeland but made no mention of a possible international participation in the trial.

"Milosevic will face the toughest time if tried here," Knezevic said. "He would get the highest possible sentence if his citizens put him on trial."

He did not specify a charge, but possible indictments mentioned by ministers within Belgrade's new administration range from corruption and abuse of power to war crimes.

The maximum sentence the former hard-liner could face under a strictly local prosecution is 20 years for war crimes.

Army promises to stay in barracks as Thailand goes to polls today

BANGKOK, Jan 5: With the memories of Thailand's 1991 military coup still fresh in many voters' minds ahead of Saturday's elections, the army has promised it will never again unseat a democratically elected government, reports AFP.

Alarming but apparently unfounded rumours of a new coup d'etat have circulated in recent months as the coalition government limped to the end of its term in power, under attack by an opposition push for a snap poll.

After several politicians raised the possibility of a "temporary suspension of democracy" if the polls resulted in a deadlock, army chief General Surayud Chulanont moved to assure Thais that there would never be a coup under his watch.

"I've said several times that we won't get involved in politics," Surayud said recently. "Coup d'etats don't fix anything. The situation must change through politics, and not by resorting to force."

For many years the Thai military was the main arbiter of power in the country, having orchestrated 10 successful coups d'etat, and seven unsuccessful ones, since the demise of the absolute monarchy in 1932.

In the 1960s and 1970s, in the midst of the Cold War, the army conducted bloody "interior security" operations to eradicate communist guerrillas and student unions.

But since the country's last military takeover in February 1991 and a bloody crackdown on mass demonstrations in Bangkok in May 1992, the armed forces have remained in their barracks.

Saturday's elections will be the first lower-house polls held since the adoption of a new reform-minded constitution in October 1997.

In a sign of the times, the main contenders are mostly civilians and not retired generals as in previous contests.

However, the old military guard remains politically influential, especially in rural areas where the traditional patronage system is firmly entrenched.

Since Surayud's nomination in 1998, the army chief has moved to depoliticise his forces and to "professionalise" the 220,000-member ground force.

"Today, the Thai army is on the road to normalisation," a

European diplomat told AFP.

Thailand's last military takeover took place in February 1991 when the elected government was toppled by coup leader General Sonthorn Kongsompong.

Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in May 1992 demanding a return to civilian rule, in protests that left dozens dead and made an indelible stain on Thailand's modern history.

The country returned to democracy in September 1992 after elections in which Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai was voted leader for the first time. He was succeeded by two other prime ministers before being voted back in in 1997.

In that year, a new "people's constitution" was framed, designed to make politics more democratic, transparent and less prone to corruption.

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Indo-US war unlikely

WASHINGTON, Jan 5: A Pentagon think tank has said that India and the United States are unlikely to engage in war at any time as the two countries have incentives for warmer relations, reports PTI.

A regional war involving the United States and India would be an unlikely occurrence, as there are incentives to warmer relations, the Institute for National Strategic Studies of the National Defence University said.

In a study titled all possible wars? Towards a consensus view of the future security environment, 2001-2025, it said India which demographically and technologically is dominant power of South Asia, has long attempted to reduce US and other western influence in the region.

However, with the collapse of the client relationship with the Soviet military-industrial Complex, India has had to back away from its pseudo-hostility toward American power. Although conflict with Pakistan appears a constant possibility, the situation differs markedly from the could war, when the US supported a anti-Soviet Pakistan, it said.

It, however, warned that nothing should be taken for granted. If India and China join hands they could establish an Asian condominium.

China is able to project sustained military power throughout the Asian continent, or, at the very least, prevent projection of US military power anywhere in Asia. This would be a China capable of being a regional peer competitor rather than a global peer.

However, this regional potential could be expanded by an informal Asian condominium between China and India, it said.

Taiwanese ship completes historic trip to China

TAIPEI, Jan 5: A ship carrying about 500 worshippers of the goddess Matsu returned from China today, completing a historic trip that marked the end of a five-decade ban on direct shipping ties between China and two Taiwanese islands, reports AP.

Cracking strings of firecrackers greeted the ship Taina after it docked at the island of Matsu. Dressed in matching red jackets, the passengers waved from the deck after the two-hour voyage.

The vessel went to China on Tuesday, becoming the first to legally sail to the mainland since the two sides split amid civil war in 1949.

"During the four days we spent in China, we deeply felt that the people there wished us well and paid great attention to us," said Chao Erh-Chung, a lawmaker who went on the trip.

On New Year's Day, Taiwan began allowing limited shipping and trading links between China and the Taiwanese islands of Matsu and Kinmen, both located just off China's southeast coast.

BRIEFLY

Quake rocks Taiwan: An earthquake measuring 4.3 on the Richter scale jolted northeastern Taiwan yesterday but no casualties or damage were reported, the Central Weather Bureau said, AFP reports from Taipei.

The quake struck at 3:03 am (1903 GMT Thursday) with its epicenter 4.6 kilometers (2.86 miles) southeast of llan. It originated 14.8 kilometres under the earth's surface. Minor tremors have been a daily occurrence on the island since a deadly quake registering 7.6 on the Richter scale struck on September 21, 1999 killing 2,400 people.

Five die in Brazil shootout: Armed robbers exchanged gunfire with police and security guards, spraying a supermarket with bullets. Five people were killed and 13 wounded in the mayhem, police said Thursday, AP reports from Brazil.

The gunfight Wednesday occurred when five heavily armed robbers attacked security guards who had come to pick up the day's cash take at a downtown supermarket, said Detective Antonio Carlos Gonçalves. Three people, a cashier, off-duty policeman and one shopper died in the shootout, Gonçalves said. One robber was killed and another two captured by police in an ensuring chase, Gonçalves said.

Russia to launch 29 rockets: Russia plans to launch 29 civilian rockets into space in 2001, carrying both manned space ships and satellites, a Russian space official said Thursday, AP reports from Moscow.

Twenty-two rockets will be launched from Russia's Baikonour cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, said Sergei Deryvashkin, spokesman for Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces, a branch of the military which also controls civilian space launches.

JAKARTA, Jan 5: The political career of Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid hangs in the balance ahead of a decision on corruption charges against him, the latest in a series of tussles he has had with politicians, reports IPS.

The house of representatives is scheduled to announce the result of its investigation on Jan 29.

Meantime, concern is rising about more political instability in the country that emerged in 1998 from three decades of authoritarian rule, and the implications of infighting between the presidency and legislators for governance here.

"If the special committee proves the president guilty, then the house will ask the people's consultative assembly for impeachment against the president," said Sri Bintang Pamungkas, an outspoken politician once jailed by Suharto.

The special committee was set up by the house to look into charges that Wahid took a two-million dollar donation from Brunei Sultan Hassan al-Bolkiah, and a 35-billion rupiah (3.5 million dollar) fund initially

owned by National Logistic Agency (BULOG).

The people's consultative assembly is the biggest representative body in Indonesia, which named Wahid president in October 1999.

So far, police have arrested Suwondo, a former close aide of the president, on charges of involvement in the 35-billion rupiah scandal. He will be tired next week.

Reports say Suwondo had asked Sapuan, once the deputy head of the agency, to transfer the 35 billion rupiah and in turn the president would name him as head of the agency.

The case is popularly known here as 'Buloggate', while the case of the Brunei sultan donation is called 'Bruneigate'.

Wahid has categorically denied any wrongdoing and rejected the special committee's call for interrogation. "The committee is illegal, and the investigation is baseless," he told reporters at the presidential palace recently.

But Pamungkas insists that Wahid has a role in the scandals. "I am sure Suwondo was asked by the president to transfer the money," Pamungkas said.

Taufiqurrahman, chairman of the nation a wakening of party that has Wahid as patron, say the corruption charges are part of a large agenda by the president's opponents to topple him.

Wahid once asked the House speaker Akbar Tanjung to calm opposition against him among the legislators, with whom Wahid has had several feuds with since he became president in October 1999.

But Tanjung refused the appeal, saying: "it's democratic country. Let the special committee complete its job."

With the corruption charges in the air, analysts see little room for improvement for Wahid's relations with the house given past tension between them.

Fahry Ali, a lecturer at the Jakarta's Islamic Institute, says that among others, ties are marred by perceptions that Wahid has been less than tough with Hutomo 'Tommy' Mandala Putra, Suharto's youngest son and a fugitive.

"The house is also upset with the president's attitude over Tommy's case," Ali said. Tommy Suharto went into hiding one and a half months ago to escape

a supreme court convictions and 18-month sentence for corruption.

Police have sent out two teams in search of Suharto, but have not been able to send him to jail.

A week before Wahid announced the rejection of pardon for Tommy Suharto in November, he had two secret meetings with him the previous month. "How can the president having a meeting with a person whose case is being handled by the court?" Ali said, calling the meeting "improper."

House speaker Tanjung called on police to investigate the meeting. "Police must summon the president about his meeting with Tommy, or the president himself explain to the public," he said.

"Public are eager to know what the president told Tommy during the meeting," he said.

Apart from the corruption charges and Tommy Suharto's case, critics in the house of representatives have also clashed with Wahid over his rejection of candidates they deem qualified for the position of the head of supreme court.

"His refusal only creates

strained relations with the house," said Ferry Mursidan Baldan, a legislator from the Golkar party that was the ruling party under Suharto's administration.

Looking back, some analysts say that while the president began with the stature and integrity to lead a fractured country, his governance performance for 2000 has been poor.

"He actually has a golden opportunity to run the government. But he missed it," said Mulya Lubis, a human rights activist. According to Lubis, Wahid initially had majority support from the five big political parties, but this support has since turned into opposition.

"He has no clear policy in running the government. He also make the public confused with his statement," he pointed out.

Umar Juoro, an economist at the private CIDES institute, added: "The president's confusing remarks have also caused the deterioration of the economy."