

# US urged to ratify CTBT

WASHINGTON, Jan 6: A report by a highly respected general provided ammunition on Friday for supporters of a global nuclear test ban treaty, who hope the incoming US administration might drop its opposition to the pact, reports Reuters.

Gen. John Shalikashvili, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, presented a report to President Bill Clinton that urged the United States to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which the Senate rejected in 1999, to the dismay of US allies.

Shalikashvili, who spent 10 months conducting a review of the contents of the treaty by interviewing nuclear experts, weapons designers and senators, concluded that ratifying the

CTBT would increase national security and the security benefits of the treaty would outweigh disadvantages.

"After these many months of looking into those issues, I have reached the same conclusion I reached when I was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and that is that this treaty has, in fact, an important part in an overall strategy of dealing with nuclear proliferation," Shalikashvili told reporters.

In a written statement, he said the Senate's vote not to ratify the treaty raised concern at home and abroad that the United States might be walking away from its traditional leadership of international nonproliferation efforts.

"I am confident that this was

not the intent of the Senate," he said. "In my conversations, I have found broad bipartisan support for strengthened US leadership of a comprehensive international campaign against proliferation."

"I recommend that the next administration work closely with Congress and US allies to mount a more integrated response to the dangers posed by the spread of nuclear weapons...and that it revisit the test ban treaty in the context of the direct and indirect contributions it can make to this policy."

More than 150 countries have signed the CTBT, but it can come into force only when 44 potentially nuclear-capable countries ratify it.

President-elect George W Bush supports the Senate's

decision not to ratify the treaty, and several people named to his Cabinet feel the same way.

Condoleezza Rice, Bush's nominee for national security adviser, said the treaty would inhibit the United States in maintaining its own nuclear stockpile and do little to stop the proliferation on such weapons.

But Bush's secretary of state-designate, Colin Powell, backed the treaty when he retired as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs in 1993.

An alliance of 16 leading nuclear nonproliferation organizations applauded Shalikashvili's report and urged Bush and the Senate to use it as the starting point for rebuilding a consensus on nuclear testing and nonproliferation.

# Afghan-trained rebels responsible for blasts in Manila: Police chief

MANILA, Jan 6: Muslim separatists who were trained in Afghanistan are responsible for five New Year's holiday bombs that killed 22 people and injured more than 120 in Manila, the Philippine national police chief said today, reports AP.

Meanwhile, Indonesian police said they were investigating claims that those responsible for a rash of Christmas Eve bombings in the predominantly Muslim country also were trained in Afghanistan. Officials in both nations said it was too early to link the attacks.

In the Philippines, still jittery from the Dec. 30 blasts, police said they found and defused a

powerful bomb a day earlier in southern Davao city. The bomb was attached to an alarm clock and packed in a box with five-centimetre nails at a shopping mall's checked-bag counter, police chief Senior Superintendent Wilfredo Garcia said.

Police Director General Panfilo Lacson said he has recommended that leaders of the secessionist Moro Islamic Liberation Front be arrested despite a government move to suspend warrants as part of a confidence-building measure to encourage the rebels to resume peace talks.

On Friday, police charged MILF chairman Salamat Hashim and six other rebel leaders and

guerrillas with murder for allegedly masterminding the bombings of a commuter train, a bus, the airport, a park and an abandoned gasoline station.

Police have arrested one MILF member who allegedly acted as a Manila scout for the separatists, according to a police complaint filed with the Justice Department.

Shariff Julabbi, a regional MILF leader, denied rebel involvement but said military camps in Manila could be targeted.

"Our fighters are busy fighting in the south and we don't have anything to do with the bombings in Manila," Julabbi said.

"The call to jihad (holy war) is still in effect and the targets here are the military installations...not the civilians."

Lacson said the bombings were carried out by a 12-man team belonging to a "special operations group" reporting directly to Salamat. He added that most of its members were trained in Afghanistan, but gave no details.

The rebels have acknowledged that many of them received military training in Afghanistan while fighting alongside Afghan Mujahedeen against the Soviets. Some training continued even after the Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan, they said.



**King Birendra of Nepal (L), Mongolian President Natsagiin Bagabandi (2nd L), Madame A. Oyunbileg (2nd R) and Queen Aishwarya (R) pose for a photograph before a banquet at the Narayan Hirty Royal Palace in Kathmandu on Friday. Mongolian President Natsagiin Bagabandi and Madame A. Oyunbileg are in Nepal on three-day official visit, the first visit of a Mongolian head of state since 1961 after establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. -- AFP photo**

# French investigators release details on Concorde crash

PARIS, Jan 6: It appears "more and more probable" that debris from a punctured tire penetrated a fuel tank and sparked a fire that caused the deadly Concorde crash last July, French investigators said in a report released Friday, reports AP.

The French Accident and Inquiry Office, known as the BEA, also said in its report that six prior incidents in which burst tires perforated fuel tanks had occurred on Concordes between June 1979 and October 1993.

Of 57 incidents in which tires had burst, 30 occurred on Concordes operated by Air France and 27 on those operated by British Airways. In 12 instances, wings or tanks incurred structural damage, and in six cases, fuel tanks were penetrated, the report said.

Since shortly after the July 25

crash, investigators have said they believe that a stray metal strip lying on the runway gashed one of the jet's tires, sending rubber debris hurtling toward fuel tanks in the left wing, prompting a fuel leak and a raging fire.

That hypothesis is looking more like the one that investigators will stay with when they publish a final report on the crash later this year.

"At this point, investigators are sure enough of their hypothesis that it is unlikely any 'scoop' will turn up, though it is still possible," a BEA official said Friday. "The investigation is now about proving these hypotheses more than trying to find a theory on which to build."

Blown-out tires have been blamed for past brushes with near-disaster of the supersonic Concorde, for decades the pride of French aviation until last

year's deadly crash.

In 1981, the US National Transportation Safety Board reported four "potentially catastrophic" incidents resulting from blown-out tires during Concorde takeoffs between June 1979 and February 1981.

The BEA report released Friday cited six incidents including at least one that was also mentioned in the NTSB report when debris from a burst tire pierced a fuel tank.

France grounded the elite jets immediately after the crash. British Airways, the other airline with a Concorde fleet, kept its planes flying until shortly before the jets' airworthiness certificate was withdrawn in mid-August.

Authorities in London have said that tests on fuel tank liners, designed to greatly reduce the chance of fire, were expected to begin in February on British Airways' Concorde planes.

# China claims to have softened stance on 'One China' policy

BEIJING, Jan 6: In an apparent gesture of goodwill, Beijing has agreed to back off slightly from its 'One China' principle while discussing the establishment of full direct trade, transport and postal ties with Taiwan, reports AFP.

Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen told representatives of Taiwan's two main opposition parties that the three direct links could be established as an "internal affair within one country."

"Qian said we might keep clear of political issues in order for the three links to take place via agreements between enterprises, associations and non-state organisations," Her Jyh-huei, the head of the Kuomintang (KMT) delegation told reporters on Friday.

Other representatives interpreted Qian's statements as meaning that as long as shipping and airline companies and port and airport officials on both sides of the Strait agreed to

transport and trade terms then the direct links could be opened.

Such statements, if true, appeared to be a softening of Beijing's previous demand that Taipei must first accept the "One China" principle before talks on the three links could begin.

The mainland's official English-language China Daily Saturday called Beijing's new stance a 'goodwill gesture' and a "slight softening" of the mainland position.

Members of the Taiwan delegation expressed hopes that direct sea links could be opened up by June or July, while air links would take longer to resolve.

Qian said all Chinese ports and airports would welcome the direct links with Taiwan and expressed hopes that Taiwan would soon end 51 years of trade restrictions and at the very least open the ports of Keelung, Taichung and Kaosiung, representatives said.

Qian also stressed that Tai-

wanese companies hoping to open up direct links with the mainland must accept a 1992 consensus on "One China" that opened the way for high-level talks between Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and the mainland's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS).

Qian did not say what role SEF and ARATS, the main bodies negotiating cross-Strait relations, would play in three links negotiations.

The talks came just days after Taiwan allowed limited direct trade and transportation links, or "mini-links," with the mainland on Tuesday.

The 29-member KMT delegation as well as delegates from the New Party, Taiwan's other large opposition group, on Saturday held talks with China's Ministry of Communications, Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation and the Ministry of Information Industry.

# Estrada makes new cabinet appointments

MANILA, Jan 6: President Joseph Estrada on Saturday swore in three new Cabinet members, part of a plan to streamline his administration and implement reforms as he faces charges of bribery and corruption in his ongoing impeachment trial, reports AP.

"There will be many changes," Estrada said. "We will concentrate on food security and, of course, we will go all-out against graft and corruption."

Estrada moved Edgardo Angara from agriculture secretary to presidential executive secretary. Angara replaces Ronaldo Zamora, one of Estrada's closest associates, who plans to run in congressional elections in May.

The executive secretary is considered the "little president" because he deals with details of administration, prepares documents and makes some decisions on behalf of the president.

Angara, a former Senate president and leader of the LDP party, which is part of Estrada's LAMP coalition, lost as Estrada's running mate in the May 1998 presidential election. A lawyer, Angara also is former president of the state-run University of the Philippines.

Estrada appointed Angara's former deputy, career official Domingo Panganiban, as agriculture secretary. Angara's assistant, Maria Cecilia Fernandez, was named head of the Presidential Management Staff, whose tasks include screening presidential appointees and reviewing state policies.

"This is a new beginning," Angara said. "We must show to the people that despite the political controversy, we can deliver public services in a more open and effective way."

Estrada said he would make "two to three" more Cabinet appointments in the coming weeks.

Press Secretary Ricardo Puno, who is on leave, plans to run for the Senate in May.