

Israel accepts US formula for Mideast talks

WASHINGTON, Jan 6: President Bill Clinton's drive for a Middle East peace accord inched ahead as Israeli officials announced qualified approval of his formula for negotiations with the Palestinians, reports AP.

But a senior Israeli official, Gilead Sher, said after seeing Clinton at the White House Friday that "We have long odds" for completing a peace accord in the two weeks Clinton has remaining in office.

Sher, a top aide to Prime Minister Ehud Barak, said that during his half-hour meeting with Clinton he turned over a detailed response by Israel to Clinton's outline and that it contained many reservations.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat also registered his side's reservations while agreeing in principle with the framework in meetings with Clinton on Tuesday.

As a result, the United States and Israel may issue a declaration that could guide the incoming Bush administration to proceed on the peace track, an Israeli official told The Associated Press.

The aim would be to indicate "where we can go in the future," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The statement would be a generalised account of the progress so far and the road ahead. A final decision is to be taken by Clinton and it then would be up to Barak and Arafat to decide whether to sign it.

Leaving the White House earlier Friday on his way to announce a forest protection plan, Clinton said, "I'm going to keep by fingers crossed" that his talks with Sher would be fruitful.

The Israeli stressed afterward that Israel's main aim was to end the violence.

And while PJ Crowley, a White House spokesman, said, "We would love to have an agreement," he said very difficult issues remain on the table.

"Our intent over the next two weeks is to take this process as far as we can," the White House official said. The comment appeared aimed at lowering expectations of an accord.

Agreeing that violence has ebbed in the last few days, Sher said, "We will have to see if the trend continues" before Israel can resume negotiations with Palestinians.

CIA Director George Tenet made plans to fly to Cairo for a meeting Sunday in the Egyptian capital with Israeli and Palestinian security experts. This is designed to bolster Israel's confidence against terrorist attack.



Palestinians march in Ramallah against the continuing Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on Friday. Some 20 Palestinians were injured by rubber-coated metal bullets as the demonstrators clashed with Israeli soldiers at the northern entrance to this West Bank town. --AFP photo

UNEP detects radiation in bomb craters in Kosovo

BERLIN, Jan 6: The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has found several bomb craters contaminated with radioactivity in Kosovo, the Berlin-based Tageszeitung (taz) is reporting in its Saturday edition, reports AFP.

The leftwing tabloid cited an interim report by UNEP on uranium-containing munitions in the war-torn Yugoslav territory, dated December 29.

The taz said it possessed a copy of the interim report and that it contradicted Pentagon affirmations that no traces of depleted uranium were to be found in Kosovo.

According to the taz, the UNEP study was based on a map provided by NATO showing 112 bomb craters with traces of uranium-containing munitions. Verification work at 12 of these sites by a UN team last November had found that eight of them had considerable contamination, the taz said, citing the UNEP report.

According to the paper, the team not only found concentrations of uranium dust, but also "numerous pieces" of unexploded munitions. UNEP considers the results found at the 11 bomb craters investigated as "representative regarding all 112", the report says, according to the taz.

As a result, it said, UNEP had reiterated an urgent recommendation it made in October 1999 to close off all 112 sites. It was also recommending precautionary examination of residents in their immediate vicinity.

The UN team had only been able to carry out its studies in Kosovo regarding contamination by radiation, the taz report said.

Investigations for possible soil- and water-contamination by highly toxic uranium dioxide dust resulting from the explosion of munitions containing depleted uranium are currently being carried out by five special laboratories, in Switzerland, Sweden, Austria, Italy and Britain, it said.



Thai Rak Thai party leader Thaksin Shinawatra shows his ballots in Bangkok yesterday. Thais went to the polls to choose a new government, expected to be a coalition led by telecoms tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra whose Thai Rak Thai party is fighting its first election. --AFP photo

Exit polls indicate setback for Thai Democrats

BANGKOK, Jan 6: Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai party has scored a convincing win against the ruling Democrats in Thailand's national elections, according to exit polls released today, reports AFP.

A combined poll taken by the Nation newspaper group and the iTV network showed Thai Rak Thai had won 230 seats up for grabs in the 500-seat House of Representatives while the Democrats managed just 107.

In Bangkok, Thaksin routed the Democrats by 34 seats to two, it added.

The Abac-KSC poll said Thai Rak Thai had claimed 209 seats against 118 for the Democrats, led by Prime Minister Chuan

Leekpai.

A Suan Dusit Rajabhat university survey said Thai Rak Thai held 219 seats, and credited the Democrats with 118.

Thaksin must now form a multi-party coalition to secure a simple majority in the parliament.

Thaksin welcomed the polls and said he was confident of building a close-knit coalition that would command 320 seats in the 500-seat House of Representatives.

"320 seats is suitable, and I want to have as few parties in my coalition as possible," he said in a television interview.

"If the result is in line with exit polls I will complete my mission

and carry out my work to the best of my ability, with all my heart and soul."

His stunning victory came despite graft allegations that have dogged his campaign and which could see him kicked out of office within months.

In an election that largely focused on Thailand's slow recovery from the 1997 financial crisis, voters turned their backs on Chuan as it became clear his administration had failed to fend off a new slowdown.

Where once the prime minister was admired for his squeaky clean credentials, Thais grew increasingly bored with his scholarly approach and became attracted by Thaksin's brash

irreverence.

Chuan, who held together a six-party coalition for the past three years, was defiant Saturday as he cast his ballot in an election he looked certain to lose.

"It's a bit difficult this time as I am fighting against the richest man in Thailand," he quipped.

The spectre of corruption has hung heavily over the campaign, the first to be held under Thailand's reformist 1997 constitution which was aimed at cleaning up the political scene.

At least 100 of the winning candidates in Saturday's poll are expected to be disqualified for cheating, the independent Election Commission said.

Japan downsizes government

TOKYO, Jan 6: Japan cut the number of its government ministries from 22 to 12 today in its most far-reaching administrative reform for half a century, amid scepticism the move was only cosmetic.

Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori hailed the changes as the third "drastic change" in Japan's modern history.

But although the nameplates on most buildings in Kasumigaseki, the government quarter in the centre of Tokyo, were changed, newspaper editorials warned it would take time for the country to wean itself off the more ingrained culture of bureaucracy.

"Old wine is being poured into a new wineskin," the leading economic daily Nihon Keizai Shimbun said, noting that the shake-up had been made without redefining the role of government.

Under the reforms, a Cabinet Office was created to consist of the most able ministers and advisers whose responsibilities include drafting the annual fiscal budget in place of the once all-powerful finance ministry.

The role of the existing Cabinet Secretariat, manned by bureaucrats, will be largely restricted to providing expert support.

Also under the reforms 22 junior ministers, or state secretaries, will be appointed from the ranks of the elected members of parliament to oversee the implementation of policies drawn up by their cabinet masters.

The onus of initiating policy is thus supposed to be taken out of the hands of the ministry mandarins and placed on elected politicians.

But conservative daily Sankei

Shimbun said the leadership of politicians could only backfire unless the focus of their awareness shifts from elections to national politics.

Sankei said the United States had prospered through administrative and fiscal reforms while Japan kept accumulating huge state debts as its politicians pleased their constituencies with taxpayers money spent on public works.

It said that collusion among politicians, bureaucrats and businesses over "vested interests" had made it difficult to change society.

"Japan is pressed for a third drastic change," Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori said in a statement on the shake-up, citing two major turning points in Japan's history -- the 1868 restoration of the emperor's authority and the country's surrender in World War II in 1945.

He said the administrative reform was aimed at "regaining integrity and manoeuvrability" in national politics for the "re-birth of government."

In the most dramatic example of reorganisation, four ministries -- covering construction, transportation, national land management and frontier development -- were merged into an entity named the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation.

The shake-up also featured a change modelled on an initiative of former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in late 80s.

Some of the work of the central ministries will be handed over to 59 new independent administrative institutions (IAIs), which are to use private sector accounting methods.

BRIEFLY

UN envoy meets Suu Kyi:

The UN special envoy to Myanmar, Razali Ismail, on Saturday met with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest since September 22, witnesses said, AFP reports from Yangon.

Razali arrived at her Yangon home at 2:00pm (1330 BST) and was still there more than an hour later, the source said. The Malaysian diplomat arrived in Yangon Friday on a five-day mission to try to bring the Myanmar junta and opposition together in a historic dialogue.

Quake rattles central Japan:

An earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 4.9 shook central Japan on Saturday. There were no immediate reports of injuries or damage, police said, AP reports from Tokyo.

The quake, which struck at 11:54 am (0254 GMT), was centered about 40 kilometers underground in the mountains of Gifu prefecture (state), 210 kilometers east of Tokyo. A portion of a highway near the epicenter was temporarily closed for inspection, but no damage was immediately reported, Gifu police said.

Gunmen kill 13 in Colombia:

Gunmen killed 13 villagers in Northern Colombia Friday two days after an alleged paramilitary massacre in the same region, police said, AP reports from Bogota.

The villagers in Guatape in Antioquia state were removed one by one from their homes and shot in the head, state police Col. Guillermo Aranda told The Associated Press. It wasn't immediately clear who was responsible for the slaying in the hillside village, 142 miles (230 kilometers) from the capital Bogota.

WASHINGTON, Jan 6: The United States on Friday issued a "worldwide caution" to Americans, warning of possible terrorist threats and urging them to increase vigilance regarding their personal safety, reports AFP.

Washington "remains concerned about the possibility for terrorist actions against US citizens and interests throughout the world," the State Department said in a statement.

The announcement said there had not been any specific threat directed against Americans but the warning was issued following the closure of the US embassy in Rome for security reasons.

It also comes amid heightened

tensions in the Middle East and dimming hopes for the conclusion of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement as violence flared again in the West Bank and Gaza.

The Department of State continues to receive reports that prompt concern about the safety and security of both official US government personnel and private American citizens worldwide," it said in a statement.

"As always, we take this information seriously.

"As a result US government facilities worldwide remain at a heightened state of alert," it said.

"In addition, US government facilities have and will continue to temporarily close or suspend public services as necessary to

review their security posture and ensure its adequacy."

Earlier Friday, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Washington had closed its embassy in Rome and sent employees home for security reasons.

"There were security concerns today that led to them close the embassy," Boucher said, adding that the mission would remain shut at least through the weekend.

A security review would be conducted Saturday and Sunday after which a decision would be made as to whether to re-open the embassy on Monday, he said.

Boucher refused to say whether the embassy had

received a specific threat or information about any possible risk but said the closure did not affect the US consulates in Italy which are located in Florence, Milan and Naples.

Friday's notice, which did not mention the Rome embassy and extends an earlier warning due to expire at the weekend, called on US citizens to exercise heightened caution "to reduce their vulnerability" when traveling abroad.

Last year, amid increasing tension in the Middle East, Washington temporarily shuttered dozens of diplomatic missions throughout the region, North Africa and South Asia.

'Historic' power-sharing deal in US Congress

WASHINGTON, Jan 6: Democrats and Republicans on Friday struck what they touted as a "historic" deal over the distribution of power in the US Congress which is equally split between the rival parties, reports AFP.

The agreement, which grants the parties equal power in Senate committees, comes just 15 days before President-elect George W. Bush is to be sworn into office. Bush narrowly won the November 7 election on a platform that included politically uniting the country.

"If the resolution I have just introduced is not miraculous, it is -- at the very least -- historic," said current Senate Majority Leader Democrat Tom Daschle.

"Today's agreement makes a big down payment on the bipartisanship we owe our country," Daschle said.

The deal provides each party equal authority in the Senate committees which bring legislation to the floor, but also provides that Republicans will chair the committees after January 20, when Vice President-elect

Dick Cheney will hold the chambers' tie-breaking vote.

"While I would prefer to have a clear advantage in every committee ... that's preferable, but that's not reality," said current Senate Minority Leader Republican Trent Lott.

The Senate passed the resolution by unanimous consent, with members of the upper house bowing to the voice of the US electorate which divided the upper chamber of the 107th Congress 50-50 in the November 7 ballot.

"We could have strung (the negotiations) out, but I just don't think that's what the American people expect of us," said Lott, who pushed for the agreement against some of his party's hardliners.

"It's going to force us to work more together than we have in the past," Lott acknowledged -- but followed with a veiled warning that belied the depth of the bipartisanship being offered.

"If this leads to a lack of action or obstructionism, it will become obvious who is doing it," he told

reporters shortly after he and Daschle announced the deal on the Senate floor.

And, Lott added, "in reality the Senate is 51-50," referring to the standing vice president's ability to cast a tie-breaking vote.

Daschle later told reporters that some Democrats were disappointed in not having won co-chairmanships of the committees as well, while some Republicans admitted they had deep reservations about the power-sharing resolution.

"It's difficult for me to see how two people can drive a car at the same time," said Republican Whip Don Nickles, speaking on the Senate floor.

When Bush is inaugurated January 20, the Republicans will control both chambers of Congress and the White House for the first time since 1955. However the margins are so thin and Bush's victory so close that Democrats were unwilling to cede power.

India on alert against militant strike on oil field

NEW DELHI, Jan 6: Indian security guards have been put on alert for a possible Muslim militant strike on the country's largest oil field, the Statesman newspaper reported today, reports AFP.

Police investigating an assault by Lashkar-e-Taiba Kashmiri separatist militants in the heart of New Delhi's Red Fort last month said they had been tipped off that the rebels were actively thinking of attacking the Bombay High field on the western coast.

The Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Toiba Islamic group took responsibility for the December 22 attack on the historic Red Fort in which three people were killed.

"Besides targeting vital installations such as telecommunication networks, it has come to light that the Lashkar-e-Taiba is eyeing the ONGC's (Oil and Natural Gas Corporation) oil drills near Bombay," a police official was quoted as saying by the Statesman.

Indian Navy, which looks after the security of the Bombay High oil field, said they had increased the patrolling.

Chinese leaders feared arrest during Tiananmen protest: Report

NEW YORK, Jan 6: Documents reportedly brought out of China by a disaffected civil servant say that the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping ordered the violent crackdown on demonstrators at Tiananmen Square out of fear they could topple the Communist regime, reports AP.

The documents reveal deep-seated paranoia that the protests were controlled by unknown anti-communist conspirators and anxiety by the party's top leaders that the more than 1 million demonstrators gathered on Tiananmen Square could demand their arrest.

"After thinking long and hard about this, I've concluded that we should bring in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and declare martial law in Beijing," Deng was quoted as saying at a meeting held at the Party Central Office on May 18, 1989.

The documents say Deng was encouraged by several members of his inner circle, including Wang Zhen, who said, "The students are nuts if they think

this handful of people can overthrow our Party and our government."

Two weeks later, troops using live ammunition moved in on the demonstrators, ending seven weeks of pro-democracy protests in Beijing. Hundreds were killed on June 4, 1989 and thousands arrested in a nationwide crackdown.

The comments by Deng and Zhen together with what are said to be minutes of secret high-level meetings, Chinese intelligence reports and records of Deng's private phone calls appear in the "Tiananmen Papers" The "Chinese Leadership's Decision to Use Force Against Their Own People."

Among other things, the papers appear to verify what many China scholars have long suspected: that hard-liners within the Communist Party urged Deng to use force to suppress students while reformers called for a more democratic solution.

The book published by Public

Affairs is excerpted in the January/February edition of Foreign Affairs magazine, and CBS' "60 Minutes" posted portions of an interview with the civil servant, who uses the pseudonym Zhang Liang, on its Web site Friday.

Zhang, who describes himself as a Communist Party member sympathetic to reformers, now resides outside of China. He said he did not use his real name because he intended one day to return to Beijing.

If genuine, the documents offer a rare glimpse into the motivations and fears behind the communist leadership's decision to order the troops into Tiananmen Square, one of the most tragic and defining moments of recent Chinese history.

The book was co-edited by Andrew Nathan, a professor of political science at Columbia University, and Perry Link, a professor of Chinese language and literature at Princeton University, who told The Associated Press the documents are

consistent with the smattering of information already available outside of China and with the testimonies of other former officials who have since fled.

The two professors, both well-known China experts, also spent hours interviewing the former civil servant, who they say painstakingly transcribed original records from files in Beijing and elsewhere onto computer disks, which he brought with him out of China.

The book only contains brief excerpts from the disks, which, if printed out, would total about 15,000 pages in English. Members of the Communist Party in Beijing could not be reached Friday to comment on the authenticity of the papers.

Orville Schell, dean of the journalism school at the University of California-Berkeley and author of several books on China, worked with Nathan and Perry. He said he was sceptical about the authenticity of the documents at first.