

Britain wants to stop bombing S-Iraq

LONDON, Jan 8: The British government will propose to the Bush administration to halt the almost daily bombing of southern Iraq in a reversal of a decade-old policy, a newspaper reported today, reports AFP.

"The whole of US-British policy towards Iraq is under review as a result of the impending arrival of a new US administration," the Guardian said.

It gave no sources for the proposal but highlighted civilian casualties which result from the patrolling of no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq by British and US warplanes following the 1991 Gulf War over Kuwait.

Iraq claims the attacks, said by Britain and the United States to be targeted at Iraqi air defences which challenge their patrols, have killed

more than 300 civilians and left 1,000 wounded in the last two years.

London, which has spent 800 million pounds (1.12 billion dollars or 1.28 billion euros) policing the zones, also fears public concern over the casualties as well as losing a pilot over Iraq, the daily said.

It noted that the southern zone was intended to counter the regime's repression of Shiites in the south, which has effectively ended.

The British government is proposing to retain the northern zone, set up to protect Kurds, because it argues the threat remains to the Iraqi Kurds.

Facing a resurgent President Saddam Hussein, who has almost seen off an air embargo against Baghdad, London has been looking at the introduction of "smart" sanctions as well, according to the

report.

These would mean an end to the all-embracing UN sanctions, increasingly opposed by Russia, France and China, for a regime that specifies a narrow band of prohibited goods, mainly weapons.

This would include sanctions that target the regime more effectively by trying to limit travel and hitting foreign bank accounts.

However London does not intend to let up on Saddam, the Guardian said, and still sees him as a serious threat to world stability.

The no-fly zones over Iraq, which has been under sanctions ever since its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, are not backed by UN Security Council resolutions.

Pinochet defies court order for his medical test

SANTIAGO, Jan 8: Openly challenging the judge seeking to try him on human rights charges, former dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet disobeyed a court order Sunday to undergo tests intended to determine his fitness for trial, reports AP.

Pinochet failed to show up at Santiago's army hospital for the tests Judge Juan Guzman had ordered by the 1400 GMT deadline. Guzman and medical experts appointed to conduct the tests later left the hospital without commenting.

Prosecution lawyers urged Guzman to put Pinochet under house arrest, but there has been no indication what the judge would do after the 85-year-old former ruler defied his order.

Pinochet on Sunday remained in Los Boldos, his heavily guarded countryside house in Bucalemu, 130 kilometers (80 miles) southwest of the capital.

Pinochet was briefly seen early Sunday afternoon as he entered a private chapel next to his house to attend Mass. Accompanied by his wife, Lucia Hiriart, and several friends, Pinochet walked with difficulty using a cane and was helped by bodyguards.

Guzman had ordered two days of neurological and mental tests to start Sunday and legal questioning on Tuesday a step widely expected to be followed by the reinstatement of Pinochet's indictment on homicide and kidnapping charges.

Guzman last month indicted Pinochet as responsible for the atrocities committed by the so-called "Caravan of Death," a military party that executed 57 political prisoners shortly after the 1973 coup led by Pinochet. The indictment, however, was overturned by the Supreme Court because Guzman failed to question Pinochet first.

Taliban recapture central Afghan district

KABUL, Jan 8: Afghanistan's fundamentalist Taliban militia have retaken the key central highlands district of Yakawlang in a major counterattack, opposition officials conceded today, reports AFP.

Anti-Taliban Harakat-i-Islami spokesman Sayed Parvez said the ruling militia fought their way back into Yakawlang, Bamian province, on Sunday after a major push.

"The fall of Yakawlang is true. We lost it late in the afternoon after several hours of fighting," Parvez said by satellite telephone from the embattled region.

The Harakat-i-Islami and Wahdat-i-Islami, two of predominantly Sunni Afghanistan's main Shia parties, captured Yakawlang 10 days ago.

Yakawlang controls access to several routes between central and northern provinces.

Parvez said the area was quiet Monday, with the Taliban consolidating their positions after resistance forces withdrew to the west.

Anti-Taliban forces are based mostly in northeastern Afghanistan but have pockets of resistance in central and northern areas, which they use to launch hit and run operations against the well-equipped militia.



Pakistani military ruler Pervez Musharraf (L) meets with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Sunday in Damascus where the two leaders denounced "Israeli aggression" against the Palestinians. Musharraf began a two-day visit to Syria for discussions on the Middle East peace process and the two countries' economic ties. -- AFP photo

25 missing, flights cancelled as snowstorms hit China

BEIJING, Jan 8: At least 25 people were missing today after snowstorms pummelled northern China, while the severe weather also led to the cancellation of more than 100 flights at Beijing airport, officials said, reports AFP.

Ninety people were reported missing in a powerful sand and snowstorm that struck the inner Mongolia region last week, but 65 were later found alive, a spokeswoman for the civic affairs bureau in the regional capital Hohhot told AFP.

She said rescuers were still searching for the missing in poor conditions and that it was hoped they were hiding in herders' tents on the remote grasslands.

A total of 37 centimetres (14 inches) of snow fell on the region during the storm, cutting off trans-

port and communication links which were still down on Monday.

Meanwhile two days of snow has caused havoc at Beijing airport, leading to the cancellation of 106 flights on Saturday and Sunday, an airport official said.

The official said more flights were being affected on Monday, although he declined to give details.

"This morning there is very low visibility and more flights are being delayed, we don't know many yet," said the official.

More than six centimetres (2.5 inches) of snow fell on Beijing between early Saturday and Sunday morning. Northern provinces of Gansu, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, Hubei, Hebei and Inner Mongolia also received heavy snowfall official reports said.

New snow was falling Monday and weather officials warned of blizzard conditions in areas of Henan, Anhui, Jiangsu and Hubei provinces with between five and 15 centimetres of snow.

Beijing municipality mobilised some 200,000 people for snow-clearing work over the weekend. Shops on main roads were ordered to clear the snow in front of their establishments or pay stiff fines of 500 yuan (60 dollars).

Despite these measures, a spokesman for Jishuitan Hospital in Beijing said at least 300 people had been admitted since Saturday with injuries related to the weather.

Verdict on Estrada by Feb 12 likely

MANILA, Jan 8: A Philippine Senate tribunal hearing graft charges against President Joseph Estrada may hand down its verdict by February 12 to allow legislators to concentrate on congressional elections, officials said today, reports AFP.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Hilario Davide, who presides over the trial, asked members of the prosecution and defence panels Monday to speed up the hearing, which Estrada's spokesman claimed was moving at an "excruciatingly slow" pace.

Concerns that the landmark trial could be a long-drawn process had also hit the economy, already reeling from nearly daily street protests calling for Estrada's ouster.

Senate president Aquilino

Pimentel said over government television that both parties agreed to end "presentation of evidence" by end January.

"The trial proper ends by January, so that before February 12 there would already be a decision," Pimentel said.

Chief prosecutor Feliciano Belmonte said his panel agreed to finish presenting its case by January 19, while defence lawyer Raul Daza said his camp "would only need 10 days."

The court's "number one consideration is that these (proceedings) must be finished, including judgement, before February 12, which is the deadline for the filing of certificates of candidacy," Belmonte said.

He was referring to the upcoming elections to both houses of the

congress in May, in which several Senators sitting as judges and members of the House of Representatives acting as prosecutors in the trial are expected to seek reelection.

Estrada has been impeached by the House of Representatives in November on charges of corruption, betrayal of public trust and culpable violation of the constitution.

If found guilty on any of the charges by the Senate tribunal, he will be removed from office.

Estrada's trial was to resume later Monday, with prosecutors expected to ask the court to allow as evidence two checks deposited in his wife's bank account which they claim were illegal gambling payoffs.

Lankan army recovers powerful explosives

COLOMBO, Jan 8: The army recovered 307 kilograms (675 pounds) of high explosives in a northern city that could blow up 10 big buildings, a top government spokesman said Monday, reports AP.

The explosives, packed in 10 bags, were found Sunday hidden in a home garden near Vavuniya, the last government-held town before the northern frontier, 210 kilometers (130 miles) north of Colombo, Ariya Rubasinghe, the government spokesman, said.

The military came to know about the explosives during questioning of a suspect of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which is fighting for a separate homeland for the minority Tamils since 1983. Sniffer dogs helped soldiers find the explosives.

The rebels have in the past targeted big buildings in Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, to gain publicity for their separatist war.

Homemade bomb kills 2 in Hanoi

HANOI, Jan 8: Two people were killed and 15 others injured when a homemade bomb exploded during a fight between rival gangs in southern Vietnam, police said Monday, reports AP.

Bombings in public places are extremely rare in Vietnam, where possession of weapons and explosives are strictly banned.

The two people died from multiple wounds when the bomb exploded Thursday night outside an entertainment area in Cam Ranh, about 400 kilometers (250 miles) northeast of Ho Chi Minh City, said a police officer who spoke on the customary condition of anonymity.



(L-R) Jennifer Aniston, David Schwimmer, and Lisa Kudrow of the television series "Friends" hold their People's Choice Award for "Favourite Television Comedy Series" at the 27th Annual People's Choice Awards on Sunday in Pasadena, California. --AFPPhoto