

International

Clinton to send Mideast envoy to Israel

Israelis, Palestinians meet CIA director in Cairo

NEW YORK, Jan 8: US President Bill Clinton said Sunday he was sending special envoy Dennis Ross to the Middle East as part of efforts to settle the half-century old conflict with "peace and dignity for both Israelis and Palestinians," reports AFP. Ross would leave for the Middle East "in the next few days" for talks on the basis Clinton's proposals presented to Israeli and Palestinian negotiators on December 23, according to a senior US official. Addressing a Jewish-American audience here, Clinton said he believed his proposals could pave the way for a comprehensive settlement in the region. "The parameters I put forward contemplate a settlement that responds to each side's essential needs, if not their utmost desires: a settlement based on sovereign homelands, security, peace and dignity for both Israelis and Palestinians," he said. The president said there could

be no genuine resolution to the conflict without a sovereign and viable Palestinian state or without taking into consideration Israel's demographic realities and security requirements. Under the proposals, the Palestinians would gain sovereignty over all of Gaza and the vast majority of the West Bank, while Palestinian refugees would be allowed to return to their homeland, Clinton said. "And so my parameters focus on the establishment of a Palestinian state," he stressed. "I believe that this is the outline of a fair agreement." Speaking of his vision of the future of Jerusalem, the president said it must be "an open and undivided city ... with assured freedom of access and worship for all." In Cairo, Senior Palestinians, Israelis and CIA director George Tenet held a marathon session until dawn Monday on security hurdles in the way of a revival of a moribund peace process, a Palestinian source said. Meeting at a secret location in Cairo, Palestinian and Israeli security chiefs began talks with Tenet at 7:00 p.m. Sunday and ended them at 5:00 a.m. (0900 BST) Monday, the Palestinian source said. The Palestinian, who asked not to be named, could not say whether the talks had ended or whether they would resume Monday. Nor would he disclose details of the discussions. The Israeli delegation was to include Shlomo Yanai, a high-ranking army official, and Avraham Dichter, the head of Israel's internal security force Shin Beth. The Palestinian delegation was to be headed by intelligence chairman Amin al-Handi, joined by the head of preventive security in Gaza, Mohammed Dahlan, and his counterpart in the West Bank, Jibril Rajub. The Palestinians and Israelis

have contradictory goals for the meeting. The Israelis demand an end to the intifada, or uprising, that erupted after a controversial Israeli visit to a holy site in east Jerusalem on September 28. The Palestinians demand Israel stop military action on their people. Palestinian officials said the head of Egyptian intelligence Omar Seliman was also attending. Clinton had personally called for this meeting, following talks in Washington last week with Arafat, who agreed to step up efforts to reduce violence "as much as possible" and to resume security cooperation with Israel. Palestinian officials said the meeting is one of several that have taken place in Egypt since Clinton extracted ceasefire pledges from Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt in mid-October.

US embassy in Rome reopens

ROME, Jan 8: The US embassy in Rome, closed on Friday over security fears, was reopened today, reports AFP. A press release said that after reassessing the security situation, authorities decided to open the embassy's doors to the public again. The US State Department announced Friday that the embassy would close until further notice. According to diplomatic sources, US authorities feared an attack by an armed Islamic unit. Italian news agency Asna cited Italian security sources as saying that a group intended to launch a laser-guided missile attack on the embassy building. Security measures remained tight at Rome's Fiumicino airport on Monday while all Italian-based US military and civil authorities also maintained a heightened state of alert.



South Korean passengers from buses await rescue workers on a snow-covered highway in Kangnung, some 237 km east of Seoul, yesterday, a day after heavy snowfalls. It was the heaviest snowfall of the season in the central part of the country. -- AFP photo



Indonesian Vice President Megawati Soekarnoputri (L) is greeted by Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at Putrajaya on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Megawati is in Malaysia on a three-day official visit to strengthen bilateral ties between both coun-

Indonesia pledges to restrict illegal migrants to Malaysia

PUTRAJAYA, Malaysia, Jan 8: Indonesia promised today to try to stem a flood of illegal immigrants seeking jobs in its wealthier neighbour Malaysia, Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said, reports AFP. He was speaking after talks between himself, visiting Indonesian Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri and Deputy Premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. "They (Indonesia) agreed to cooperate with Malaysia in whatever ways to curb illegal immigrants coming to Malaysia," Syed Hamid told a press conference after the hour-long talks at the administrative capital here. He said Malaysia has "a few hundred thousand" illegal immigrants, most of them Indonesians. "To us this is a serious figure." The immigration department last month said it has set a target of repatriating 100,000 people next year to make the country free of illegal immigrants. A total of 97,147 illegal immigrants were deported last year, of whom 83,190 were Indonesians. There are about 700,000 legal foreign workers in the country. Syed Hamid said Megawati, who is making her first official trip to Malaysia since taking up her post in October 1999, asked Malaysia to employ more Indonesian workers. "We said we will take in foreign workers based on our needs. "We said the question of illegals must be tackled. I think she understood the situation very well. They agreed that there must be a proper structure (for the entry of workers)." Megawati arrived Sunday and leaves Tuesday. Syed Hamid said Indonesia asked Malaysia to increase trade and investment. In the 10 months to October last year two-way trade was worth 12 billion ringgit (3.15 billion dollars), with the balance in Indonesia's favour.

"Abdullah gave the assurance that Malaysian investors are still keen to invest in Indonesia, especially in the plantation sector," he said. "But Indonesia must be able to create business confidence," he said, adding that investment would depend on confidence in political stability. "Malaysia will continue to hold to its policy that the best way to (promote) changes is economic development. The best way of ensuring regional security is by prospering thy neighbour," he said. Malaysia has proposed that senior officials meet in February to discuss ways to resolve outstanding problems such as allegations of border incursions by Malaysian loggers. Also up for discussion would be Jakarta's request to provide education opportunities for its students in information technology in local universities.

Hurriyat's Pakistan mission faces setback

NEW DELHI, Jan 8: The future of a planned mission by Kashmiri separatist leaders to Pakistan looked bleak today, amid a deepening impasse over the issuance of travel documents by the Indian government, reports AFP. Abdul Ghani Bhat, the chairman of Kashmir's main separatist alliance -- the All Party Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference -- reiterated today that he would not identify the members of the proposed delegation until New Delhi issued passports to all seven members of the Hurriyat executive. For its part, the Indian government has indicated that it must first receive a list of the delegates before deciding whether to issue travel documents on a "case by case" basis. The Hurriyat has set January 15 as the date for sending the delegation for talks with Pakistani officials and Muslim militant groups. The mission aims to build on the nascent peace process in Kashmir, prompted by the Indian government's ongoing unilateral ceasefire in the separatist-torn region. "As it appears now, I am not sure we will get the passports before January 15," Bhat, who is currently in New Delhi, told AFP. "By refusing to issue these documents, the Indian government is violating our basic right to travel," Bhat added. Only two of the Hurriyat executive currently have valid travel documents. India has regularly rejected requests by Hurriyat leaders to go overseas, citing national security concerns. The passport issue is also a bone of contention within the Hurriyat, which comprises two dozen separatist parties who are roughly split between those who favour Kashmiri independence and those who want to accede to Pakistan. A Hurriyat executive meeting last week failed to reach a con-

sensus on who should make up the delegation to Pakistan, and instead left the final decision to Bhat. Bhat firmly rejects suggestions that he is opposed to the inclusion of some hardline, pro-Pakistan Hurriyat leaders, and that he is privately hoping New Delhi will reject their passport requests. "We have clearly said we want seven passports for seven members," Bhat said. "I don't draw lines between so-called moderates and hardliners. "The decision regarding who should make up the delegation is mine alone, and I will not reveal my choice until all seven leaders have been granted documents." With India still refusing to engage in direct talks with Pakistan over Kashmir, Bhat said the Hurriyat mission was of crucial importance.

BRIEFLY

Five mortar shells hit Tehran: Five mortar shells hit northern Tehran on Sunday but there were no reported injuries in the attack, the state IRNA news agency said, AFP reports from Tehran. An AFP photographer on the scene said the shells appear to have been fired from an empty plot of land just northwest of Vanak Square, a major plaza in the capital. IRNA said security forces were still investigating the incident. **Gas tanker blast kills 12 in India:** At least 12 people were burned to death when a gas tanker collided with a truck Sunday near the northern Indian city of Kanpur, the United News of India said, AFP reports from New Delhi. The police said six others were seriously injured when the tanker carrying inflammable gas exploded in a ball of fire after ramming the stationary truck in Bara village near Kanpur. The victims were killed instantly, a Kanpur police spokesman said.



Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori (C) is welcomed by the South African Foreign Minister Nkosazana Zuma upon his arrival at the Johannesburg International airport yesterday. Mori is on a three-day visit to South Africa. --AFP photo

Former ULFA leader offers to broker peace talks

GUWAHATI, Assam, India, Jan 8: A former militant separatist leader today volunteered to broker peace talks between the Indian government and an outlawed rebel group in the northeastern state of Assam, reports AFP. Sunil Nath, the former publicity chief of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), who surrendered nine years ago, said he was prepared to act as a go-between if it helped bring peace to rebel-torn Assam. "I will be very happy if I can help in any way to bring the ULFA and the government together for peace talks in the greater interest of Assam", Nath told AFP in an interview. However, he made it clear that both sides would have to agree to his participation. Nath was among the ULFA's top policy makers. He surrendered following an ideological rift with the group's leadership. The ULFA is one of the frontline guerrilla groups in the northeast, fighting for an independent homeland outside the Indian federation since 1979. Nath warned it would be wrong to write off the ULFA as "a spent force," as the group still had strong public support, even if demand for a sovereign Assamese state had waned. The former militant suggested the government announce a unilateral ceasefire in Assam to enable the ULFA to come forward for talks.

"Some of the top ULFA leaders, including its commander-in-chief Presh Baruah, have spoken to me in the last few days ... they seem willing for talks," Nath said. "But it all depends on how sincere the government is about such a proposal." However, coming forward for talks did not mean ULFA militants were surrendering, he stressed, adding negotiations were a means to see if certain demands could be sorted out through dialogue. "The government should not put any conditions and be prepared to talk even on sovereignty."

Thaksin plans to form a three-party coalition

BANGKOK, Jan 8: Telecoms magnate Thaksin Shinawatra set about forming Thailand's next government today, even as a chaotic vote count delayed the release of official results from weekend elections, reports AFP. Rough tallies showed his Thai Rak Thai party had secured a runaway victory against the ruling Democrats who were punished for their failure to pull off a convincing economic recovery after the 1997 financial crisis. After contesting its first national election, Thaksin's populist Thai Rak Thai scored a landslide which may allow it to rule in its own right -- a feat no other party has achieved in the history of Thai democracy. However, the billionaire businessman has had to set his victory speech aside as the Election Commission (EC) battles to finalise the count from a poll it labelled "the dirtiest ever". Snowed under by complaints about vote-buying and ballot-box tampering, it admitted less than half the constituencies had submitted their results and that there was no hope of a resolution by Monday evening. Heartened by unofficial interior ministry figures which showed he had trounced the Democrats, Thaksin lost no time in pulling together what will be the tightest-knit coalition to rule Thailand in decades. "By Thursday it will be more clear which party will be brought into the coalition," the billionaire businessman told reporters Monday. He is expected to unveil the alliance before travelling to his hometown of Chiang Mai Friday to thank his supporters for the victory they helped hand him.

Thaksin said he was still planning to form a three-party coalition to give him a sturdy majority with 320 MPs in the 500-seat House of Representatives, replacing Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's outgoing six-party alliance. The New Aspiration Party is widely believed to be the second party in the new coalition, but the third will chosen according to final vote tallies and its willingness to pledge absolute loyalty to Thai Rak Thai's policies. Media speculation focused Monday on the make-up of Thaksin's cabinet, particularly the crucial finance portfolio. The charismatic tycoon has said he will look beyond his own party to a candidate capable of lifting the economy out of the doldrums.

Malaysians seek UN help to free Anwar

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 8: Thousands of Malaysians have signed a petition urging UN chief Kofi Annan to head an international campaign for the release of jailed ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim, supporters said today, reports AFP. Raja Petra Kamarudin, director of the FreeAnwar Campaign, told AFP that about 21,000 people petitioned the United Nations secretary-general "to lead the world community in demanding the immediate and unconditional release" of Anwar. The petition was handed in to the local UN office Monday, he said. It was launched on October 14 by the women's wing of the National Justice Party led by Anwar's wife, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. "Many appeals have been made to the authorities by various sectors of Malaysian society but they have fallen on deaf ears. We are now inviting the world community to add its voice to ours," the petition said. It said Anwar's sacking as deputy premier and his subsequent arrest, assault and imprisonment were tantamount to a travesty of justice. "He has been subjected to farcical trials which have outraged the international judicial and legal fraternity," it said, describing Anwar as a victim of malicious, vicious political persecution. "He posed a challenge to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's authoritarian might and the corruption and cronyism that taint his regime.

Tribal militants kill 4 in Assam

GUWAHATI, India, Jan 8: Suspected tribal militants shot dead four members of a family and critically wounded three others in India's northeastern state of Assam, officials said today, reports AFP. A police spokesman said heavily armed guerrillas of the United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) entered the house of a local Karbi tribesman in eastern Assam's Karbi Anglong district late Sunday night. "The militants lined up seven family members and fired at them from close range, killing four on the spot and seriously injuring three others," Karbi Anglong police chief Anil Phukan told AFP.

World's largest religious festival begins today amid tight security

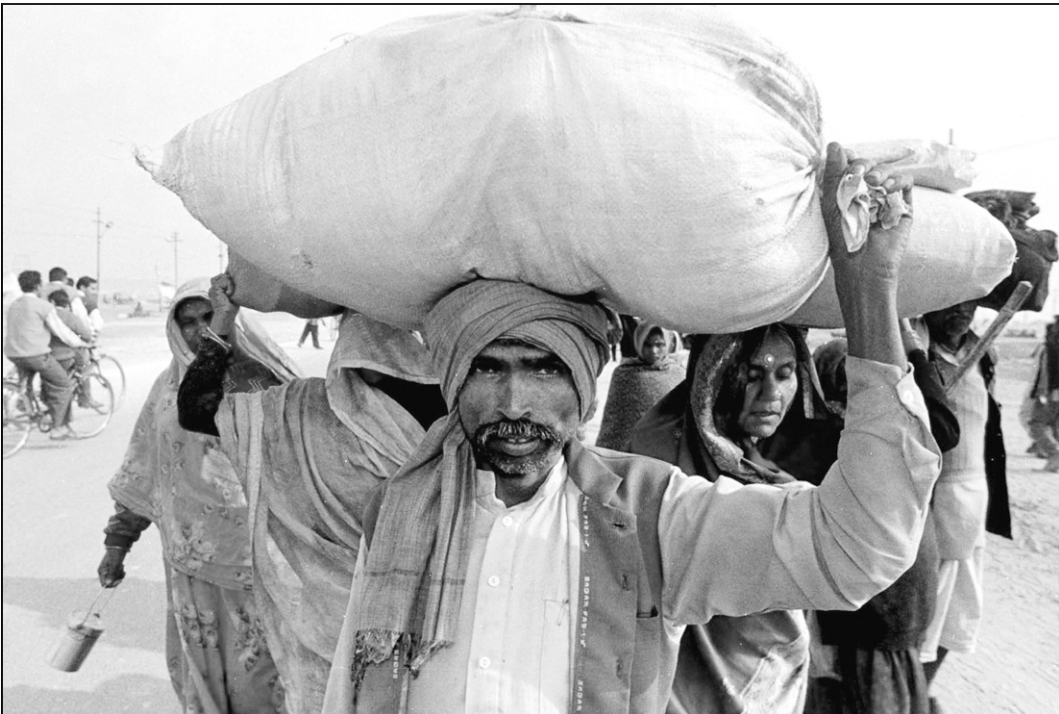
ALLAHABAD, India, Jan 8: Hundreds of thousands of Hindu sages and pilgrims gathered amid tight security today in the northern Indian town of Allahabad on the eve of the world's largest religious festival, reports AFP. At its peak the 42-day Maha Kumbh Mela (Great Kumbh Fair), which begins Tuesday, will draw up to 30 million devotees seeking to wash away their sins where the holy Ganges and Yamuna rivers converge. The current Maha Kumbh Mela -- held once every 12 years -- has been subjected to unprecedented security measures amid concerns of a possible attack by Muslim militants. Mine-detector teams, navy divers and sniffer dogs have been deployed to secure the massive 5,000-acre (2,000-hectare) site. "We have a very tight security system. Our primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of all

pilgrims here," said Allahabad Senior Superintendent of Police Alok Sharma. A closed circuit surveillance system will constantly monitor all areas of the site, where 5,000 local police will be reinforced by army personnel and intelligence officers. The air force will also maintain aerial surveillance from two helicopters. Around 30 people, most of them Hindu pilgrims, were killed during an attack by Muslim militants on a pilgrimage site in the restive state of Kashmir on August 1. As well as a possible attack, security officials are also concerned at the possibility of the kind of stampede that saw between 500 and 1,000 people crushed to death during a 1954 Kumbh Mela. Another stampede killed 60 people during the last Maha Kumbh Mela in 1989, which The Guinness Book of Records

described as the "greatest recorded number of human beings assembled with a common purpose." As of Monday, an estimated 200,000 devotees had arrived in Allahabad, braving a cold snap that sent night-time temperatures plunging to close to freezing. Preparations, which began months ago, have included building 27 pontoon bridges spanning the Yamuna and Ganges to allow freedom of movement. Detailed lighting arrangements have been made, including the installation of 20,000 electric poles decorated with coloured bulbs. Although, 6,000 public toilets have been hurriedly installed at the sprawling Kumbh Mela site, locals and environmentalists fear the event will dump tonnes of garbage and pollution. Attendance on the most auspicious bathing day, which falls

on January 24, is expected to top the 30-million mark, while a total of 70 million devotees are expected to have visited the site by the time the event winds up on February 21. This time around, the Kumbh Mela is attracting attention for its political as well as religious significance. Radical Hindu leaders are expected to use the event to announce dates for the construction of a Hindu temple -- devoted to the god Ram -- over the ruins of a mosque razed by Hindu fanatics in 1992 in the northern town of Ayodhya. The destruction of the mosque triggered widespread Hindu-Muslim rioting that left 2,000 people dead. The Indian government has appealed to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council - VHP) -- the group spearheading the temple campaign -- not to go ahead with the announcement, which is likely to inflame com-

munal tensions. However, Mahant Paramhans, a senior sadhu (holy man) who has been a high-profile torch-bearer for the temple's construction, said the appeals would be in vain. "Have you ever seen us abiding by the rules set by the government?" Paramhans said. "We believe in respecting the sentiments of Hindus all over the world and nothing else," he said. A marble model of the proposed temple to be built in Ayodhya has been brought to Allahabad. Among the sadhus gathering here, the most revered are the Nagas (the unclothed) -- dreadlocked, ash-covered ascetics who live in caves and forests, existing on herbs, roots and plants. The Nagas will lead off the bathing ritual on January 24.



Hindu devotees arrive at Prayag in Allahabad on Sunday ahead of Maha Kumbh Mela, a religious gathering. Sadhus and pilgrims have begun gathering on the banks of the Ganges for the 42-day-long religious pilgrimage, described as the world's greatest gathering of mass humanity. --AFP photo