

International

Cairo talks to end ME violence fail

Tens of thousands of Israelis demonstrate against division of Holy City for peace with Palestinians

JERUSALEM, Jan 8: Middle East peace prospects took a dive Monday after security talks in Cairo to end the violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories failed as a top Palestinian official rejected US proposals for a peace agreement, reports AFP.

US Middle East envoy Dennis Ross was due to arrive in the region Wednesday for last-ditch talks, said senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat, who was nonetheless pessimistic that a peace agreement could be reached before US President Bill Clinton leaves office January 20.

"I think it is becoming very difficult to reach something before Clinton leaves office," Erakat told AFP.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak acknowledged there was more "uncertainty than certainty" concerning security questions after the failed meeting and that there were doubts on Clinton's ability to pull together an agreement in his

remaining days.

But speaking by video conference from Jerusalem to a conference of the Council of Foreign Relations in Washington, Barak said he remained determined and that if an accord were delayed, agreement "might not be achieved for a long time."

In a new blow to Clinton's peace drive, Palestinian information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo said "the most dangerous" aspect of the Clinton proposals was that they were nothing more than "general principles lacking guarantees on their application, and every point of which will require further negotiations."

Referring to the 1993 Oslo accords, he said: "We have learned our lesson from the first declaration of principles, after seeing that Israel immediately got everything we had signed on, while we have to negotiate for years to receive what we are supposed to get according to the agreement."

Meanwhile, tens of thousands

of Israelis, most of them Jewish settlers or members of the right-wing, converged on Jerusalem Monday evening for a rally against dividing the Holy City in order to reach a peace deal with the Palestinians.

Tides of people waved flags, sang Jewish songs and swore allegiance to keeping Jerusalem united under Israeli rule.

"This isn't a demonstration, but an expression of the people of Israel's tie with this eternal city," Jerusalem's hardline Mayor Ehud Olmert told the crowd.

Police said more than 100,000 people attended the rally, while organisers put the figure at 250,000.

The event went off mostly without trouble, although four Palestinians said they were attacked by demonstrators. One of them was hospitalised, military radio said.

"Jerusalem is in danger for us," said 34-year-old Bini

Rosenberg, who had travelled to the rally from southern Israel near Be'er Sheva.

Watching her freckled six-year-old daughter Herut wave a giant Israeli flag, she said, "I do not know any Jew in the world who does not want peace, but what kind of peace?"

Police arrested four right-wing Jewish radicals for wearing T-shirts that incited violence against Arabs, Jerusalem police chief Mickey Levy told Israeli radio.

Military radio reported that an Israeli woman was arrested trying to enter the al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the third holiest site in Islam, dressed as an Arab.

The gathering was centred around east Jerusalem's walled Old City, home to what Jews call al-Haram al-Sharif and what Jews refer to as the Temple Mount, their most holy site.



Tens of thousands of Israelis, many of them Jewish settlers or members of the right-wing, gather at Jerusalem's Old City Jaffa Gate on Monday as a picture of the Dome of the Rock is projected on the ancient walls, during a rally against dividing the Holy City in order to reach a peace deal with the Palestinians.

-- AFP photo

8 killed in Pak train crash

KARACHI, Jan 9: Eight people were killed and 100 injured today when a passenger train derailed near the southern Pakistani town of Hyderabad, rescue workers and railway officials said, reports AFP.

Hyderabad police chief Saud Mirza told AFP six carriages careened off the tracks due to a "technical fault" as the train made its way from the northwestern city of Peshawar to this southern port.

A local volunteer rescue group said eight people died and 100 were injured, seven of them seriously.

Mairaj Ahmed, spokesman with the private Edhi Welfare Trust, said seven male passengers and one railway guard died in the crash.

The number of injured has gone up to 100. Seven of the seriously injured passengers are being flown to Karachi in a special Edhi Trust helicopter, he said.

Mirza said rescue operations were ongoing and the police death toll of six could rise as the carriages were inspected.

The latest reports from the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan also put the toll at eight.

Lockerbie trial begins closing arguments

CAMP ZEIST, Netherlands, Jan 9: Prosecutors began today to sum up their case against two Libyans accused of the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, as the marathon trial here draws to a close, reports AFP.

Deputy prosecutor Alastair Campbell began by asking for two of the charges -- conspiracy to murder and breach of aviation security -- against the men to be dropped.

Only one charge would remain, that of murder. It carries an automatic life sentence.

"In my submission," he told the court here, "the Crown has proved the case against each of the accused beyond reasonable doubt."

The prosecution case was largely circumstantial, he admitted, but "from a number of sources which when taken together provide a corroborative case."

Al-Amin Khalifa Fhimah and Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, both Libyans, are accused of planting a bomb on Pan Am Flight 103 which exploded on December 21 1988.

The blast killed a total of 270 people aboard and on the ground as blazing debris rained down on the town of Lockerbie in southwest Scotland.

Both men deny murder.

The trial opened on May 3 last year at Camp Zeist, a former US base in the Netherlands.

31 arrested in Ivory Coast after coup attempt

ABIDJAN, Jan 8: Ivory Coast officials arrested dozens of northerners on Monday in a crackdown against a foiled bid to unseat the two-month-old government of President Laurent Gbagbo in the latest political chaos to hit the once stable west African nation, reports AFP.

At least 31 people, mainly hailing from northern Ivory Coast, were arrested in connection with the insurgency, which authorities said had the backing of sources in neighbouring countries.

A three-day, night-time curfew was issued late Monday as tension hung over the commercial capital, Abidjan.

Several people on both sides died during the failed power grab, as troops in Abidjan battled before dawn against unidentified mutineers who had temporarily seized the national television and radio headquarters, familiar first targets of putschists.

The majority of those arrested were from the north or from neighbouring countries, according to a list read out at a press conference in Abidjan.

Lanka offers conditional ceasefire to Tigers

"But the LTTE refuses to negotiate and as long as the LTTE does not agree to end the war, it is going to be very difficult for the government to end the war alone."

The issue of a truce has led to an impasse in efforts to bring the LTTE and the government to the negotiating table.

Official sources said Norway's special envoy to Sri Lanka, Erik Solheim, was expected to arrive here early Wednesday for fresh talks with Sri Lankan leaders.

President Kumaratunga said that her government has been trying for two years through the Norwegians to get the LTTE to stop the war. They (the LTTE) have refused up to now," she said.

Kumaratunga said she did not believe that the LTTE was sincere about ending the war and entering talks to resolve a conflict which has claimed over 60,000 lives in the past two decades.

"We are willing to stop the war and call any ceasefire anytime," Kumaratunga said. "But there is one condition... we are ready for a ceasefire if the LTTE is willing to agree to begin negotiations."

Bush reaffirms support for missile defence system

a pay raise for US soldiers, modernising weapons systems and nuclear non-proliferation, officials said.

Senator Carl Levin, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, suggested that Bush had softened his position on the process of scaling back US troop involvement in European peacekeeping missions.

"I think he's less committed to very specific major shifts in policy than he might have sounded in the campaign, and a little more cautious, whether it's troop removal in Europe -- that's more of a stated goal rather than a statement of unilateral deterrence," Levin said.

Likewise, on missile defence, Bush "indicated he recognised

the complexity of the issues, particularly our allies having problems with it," Levin added. "I think he recognised there's at least an argument on that side of it."

While there were disagreements expressed in the meeting, Levin said Bush seemed interested in finding areas of bipartisan agreement.

Republican Senator John Warner, the soon-to-be-chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, agreed that Bush stressed the importance of the United States remaining engaged in Europe. But he said the president-elect continued to talk about scaling back.

Reports on Tuesday said police

Li Peng begins India visit

BOMBAY, Jan 9: Li Peng, the second-highest ranking Chinese leader, arrived here today on a nine-day visit to India that will cement the normalisation of ties after a rift caused by New Delhi's 1998 nuclear tests, reports AFP.

Li, who is chairman of the National People's Congress, or parliament, is the highest-ranking Chinese official to visit since bilateral ties frayed in the wake of the tests two years ago.

His trip is expected to pave the way for a visit by Premier Zhu Rongji later this year.

"Li is number two in the Chinese hierarchy and the very fact of his decision to undertake the India visit is highly significant," said analyst K.K. Katyal.

"Given to conveying messages through its actions, Beijing has clearly suggested through this step the end of the slump in bilateral relations. The visit will help India and China to judge each other's thinking on global issues."

Li will attend a banquet hosted by the governor of Maharashtra state on Tuesday evening and visit a museum and export processing facility the next day.

He will arrive in New Delhi on January 11.

Li's arrival came a day after

internal Chinese documents were released in the United States, pointing an accusing finger at the former premier as the strongest advocate of sending the army against the students gathered in Tiananmen Square on the eve of June 4, 1989.

Sino-Indian relations have improved in the past year and there have been a flurry of top-level exchanges, covering issues from long-running border disputes to enhanced trade and closer political relations.

Li's visit takes place against the backdrop of both the Asian neighbours agreeing to stronger "confidence-building measures" in the military field along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that serves as their common border.

The two fought a bitter border war in 1962, with Chinese troops advancing deep into the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and inflicting heavy casualties.

India says China still holds 40,000 square kilometers (16,000 square miles) of its territory in Kashmir, while China lays claim to a wide swathe of territory in Arunachal Pradesh.

Bollywood 'shocked' over arrest of top film financier

BOMBAY, Jan 9: Bombay's film industry, or "Bollywood", reacted with shock and disbelief today to the arrest of top film financier Bharat Shah for alleged underworld links, reports AFP.

Shah was arrested by Bombay police on Monday and remanded to police custody until January 18 by a local court that deals with cases of organised crime.

Police said they possessed a tape-recorded telephone conversation between Shah and Karachi-based Bombay mafia personality, Chhota Shakeel, regarding the extortion of money from a Bombay businessman.

A Bombay afternoon newspaper published excerpts of one such conversation on Tuesday.

"The industry is shocked. He is financing so many films. We do not know what new things will come out in the police inquiry," Sushma Shiroman of the Indian Motion Picture Producers Association told AFP.

Reports on Tuesday said police had raided the Bombay offices of B4U and seized several incriminating records and bank documents.

Analysts said Shah had four or five films on the production floor, in which he had invested more than 600 million rupees (14 million dollars).

Hollywood stars to attend Kumbh Mela

NEW DELHI, Jan 9: Newlywed pop diva Madonna will join other global celebrities such as Pierce Brosnan, Sharon Stone and Demi Moore at the world's largest religious festival, the Times of India said today, reports AFP.

The stars will attend the 42-day Mahat Kumbh Mela (Great Kumbh Fair), which began Tuesday and is expected to draw up to 70 million devotees seeking to wash away their sins in the northern Indian town of Allahabad where the Ganges and Yamuna rivers converge.

The Times of India quoted a travel source as saying the self-styled Queen of Pop and Hollywood stars such as Brosnan, Stone, Moore and Richard Gere, a regular visitor to India, would attend the festival later this month.

British tour operator Cox and Kings confirmed that several Hollywood stars would be coming but refused to divulge their names for security reasons.

"We are bringing in more than 600 premium guests to the

Kumbh from around the world," said Indranil Pramanik, a manager in the product development department of Cox and Kings told the Times.

Madan Kak from the Travel Corporation of India said they were flying in unnamed "French celebrities" and added that their package would include other exotic Hindu locales such as Pushkar in the desert state of Rajasthan.

A travel executive told AFP the stars mentioned in the report were very likely to come.

"They are Hindu freaks or heavily into India," she said. "But I can't see them staying on in the Kumbh even in the most luxurious tents."

"They will make flying visits and if they stay overnight, it will probably be in some five-star hotel nearby or they will be hosted by prominent citizens."

The current Maha Kumbh

Mela held once every 12 years has been subjected to unprecedented security measures.

on as head of the powerful Central Military Commission.

The move would effectively give him the role of patriarch or "red emperor," like Deng.

"The publication of the

Tiananmen papers is probably an initiative by the reformists in the Communist Party, and is not good news for either Jiang Zemin or Li Peng," said Cabestan.

"The battle to succeed Jiang Zemin is hotting up. We are heading towards a trial of strength at the heart of a very divided leadership."

A Beijing-based Western diplomat said the release of the material could also re-ignite calls for a revision of the official verdict on the protests, which the Communist Party called a counter-revolutionary rebellion.

Families of the victims have long been campaigning for a reappraisal.



Hindu devotees make their way to compounds near the river Ganges in Allahabad on Monday to take part in the Kumbh Mela. More than one million Hindu pilgrims began washing away their sins in the holy waters of the Ganges river yesterday, the first day of the world's largest religious festival.

-- AFP photo

Tiananmen crackdown was 'highly necessary': China

fabricating materials and distorting facts will be futile," Xinhua quoted Zhu as saying, calling

Zhu was speaking after the emergence of papers in the United States charting the bickering and uncertainty in the Communist hierarchy during the six weeks of pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989.

His comments were the first official mention of the documents.

Zhu's remarks appeared to be a direct retort to reformers in China's government whom analysts say leaked the papers to try to get the upper hand over hardliners ahead of next year's key leadership reshuffle.

The material is said to have been smuggled out of China by a Communist Party reformer.

The documents show Jiang was hastily forced into the top job in the government and party in the aftermath of the massacre by Deng and the old guard, damaging his reformist creden-

tials.

Wong Yiu-chung, an expert on Chinese politics at Hong Kong's Lingnan College, said: "Basically, these documents support the reformists, the moderates. It's very clear who are the bad guys."

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, of the Hong Kong-based French Centre for Contemporary Studies on China, said: "Jiang appears as the chosen man of the conservative old guard. If he does not have blood on his hands then those who appointed him have."

Different factions within the party are currently jockeying for position ahead of next year's 16th party congress where the top three leaders -- Jiang, hardline parliament chief Li and Premier Zhu Rongji -- are all due to step down from their posts because they are over 70.

Jiang is reportedly trying to retain a strong behind-the-scenes role after stepping down from the presidency by staying