

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, 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."

CIA chief George Tenet held 10 hours of talks in Cairo with Israeli and Palestinian security officials on ways to reduce the ongoing violence, but the talks collapsed "because of the intransigence of the Israeli position and their insistence on continuing to keep the blockade on the Palestinian territories and divide them," a Palestinian official said.

Israel had insisted on a Palestinian crackdown on attacks against Israeli troops, civilians and Jewish settlements as a condition for new peace talks based on Clinton's peace initiative presented more than two weeks ago.

But the Palestinians counter that Israel must first lift its blockade against the Palestinian territories -- which has been in effect for most of the 13-week-old Palestinian intifada or uprising -- and accuses the Israeli military of assassinating more than a dozen Palestinian activists.

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 headline 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 Bet 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-Asqa 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 Muslims 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 Saad 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 Ahmmed, 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.

Lanka offers conditional ceasefire to Tigers

COLOMBO, Jan 9: President Chandrika Kumaratunga has accused Tamil rebels of refusing to enter Norwegian-backed political talks and vowed to press ahead with a controversial peace plan, a state-run daily said today, reports AFP.

Kumaratunga, in an address to residents of Jaffna, the heartland of the Tamil separatist campaign, offered a conditional truce but expressed doubt that the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would respond to it.

The LTTE on Christmas eve declared a unilateral month-long ceasefire and urged the international community to pressure Kumaratunga's government to reciprocate the truce.

"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."

"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 Sri Lanka'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.

"I do not believe that the LTTE wants to end the war... The LTTE is not for giving human rights to the (minority) Tamil people. If they are for that why do they kill so many Tamil people."

"Why do they grab your children, nine and 10 year old children, who should be in school and who should be looked after by their mothers and fathers and force them to become human bombs? They force them to hang a cyanide capsule round their neck and go and kill others.... The LTTE only believes as they have proved through action in the last 17 and 18 years that they only believe in violence." There was no immediate LTTE reaction to Kumaratunga's statement made over a satellite link to residents in the Jaffna peninsula on Monday.

Bush reaffirms support for missile defence system

AUSTIN, Texas, Jan 8: US President-elect George W. Bush reaffirmed his support for a controversial missile defence system Monday, but acknowledged it was a sensitive subject for other nations, reports AFP.

"It's a sensitive subject for leaders of different countries around the world," Bush told reporters in Austin.

"On the other hand, I think it's our obligation to do everything we can to protect America and our allies from the real threats of the 21st century," he added.

Bush made the comments after meeting with congressional leaders who serve on the various defence-related committees.

Among the issues discussed

besides missile defence were peace-keeping efforts in Europe, 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 peace-keeping 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 determination," 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.

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 gauge 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 territory in Kashmir, while China lays claim to a wide swathe of territory in Arunachal Pradesh.

'Adam and Eve were Australians, not Africans'

SYDNEY, Jan 9: Adam and Eve were Australians, not Africans as most experts on human evolution now believe, according to recently completed Australian research, reports AFP.

The research, soon to be published by an American scientific journal, presents a new genetic tree showing anatomically modern humanity emerged from a common ancestor who lived in Australia 60,000 years ago.

A team led by anthropologist Alan Thorne of Canberra's Australian National University, also shows Australian was once home to a group of Aboriginal people whose genetic line has vanished from the planet.

The discoveries are based on new analysis of the oldest DNA recovered from human remains; genetic material from a 60,000 year-old skeleton found near Lake Mungo in the eastern Australian state of New South Wales in 1974.

Mungo Man, as he has been dubbed, is creating a stir in the scientific community by casting serious doubt on the Out of Africa model of human evolution which has been backed by most international experts.

It holds that all living people are descended from a group of homo sapiens that left Africa around 100,000 to 150,000 years ago.

DNA from a Croatian Neanderthal who lived about 28,000 years ago was previously the oldest.

Thorne said most primitive forms of DNA known in living

humans until now had been found in sub-Saharan Africa, leading to the theory that mankind originated in Africa and left it as modern Homo Sapiens before spreading around the world.

"And so what we have now found is a lineage that is older than any of those," Thorne told ABC radio.

"It's earlier than the putative most recent common ancestor, the so-called Eve point in mitochondrial evolution."

"So under a strict out of Africa hypothesis I have to say well they were wrong, obviously Eve was an Australian." Thorne also believes modern Aboriginal Australians descended from two groups of distinctly different people.

"What I have always argued is that there is a distinct difference anatomically between these two groups of people," he said. He believes one group entered Australia about 40,000 years before the others, a new group of "robust" people, who became visible in Australia about 20,000 years ago and appear to have arrived with edge-ground tools.

"I suspect that these new robust people enter Australia with a new tool kit and then mix together with other people who are already here to produce the extraordinary mix of people that we now call Aboriginal Australians," he said.

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."

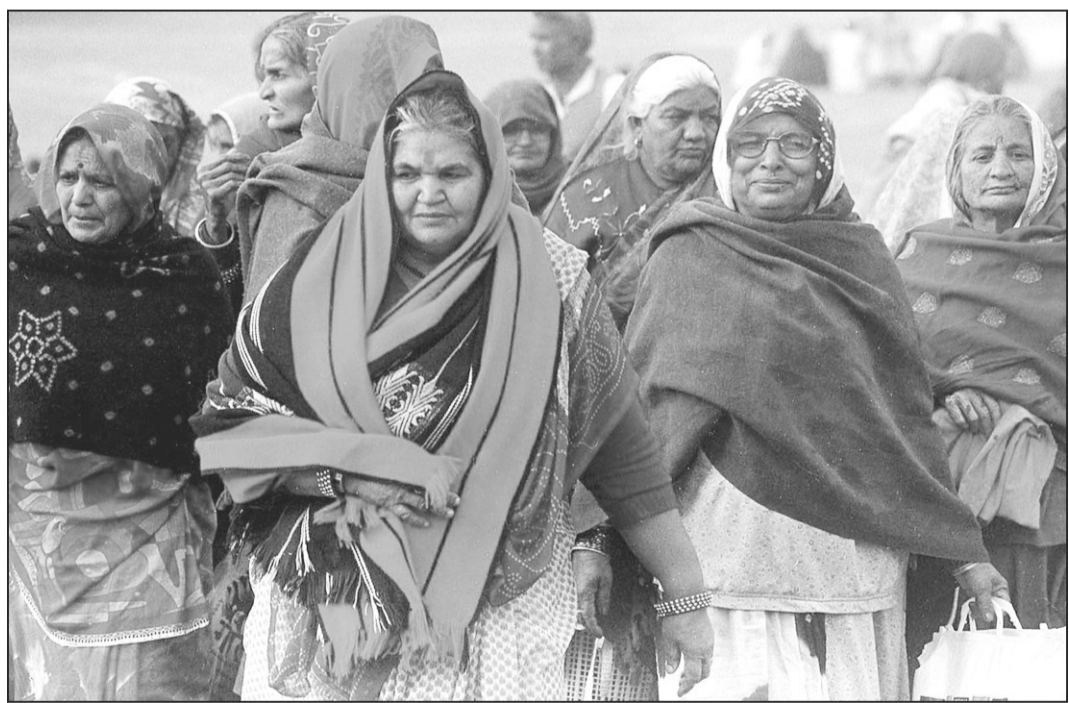
The prosecution case was largely circumstantial, he admitted, but "from a number of sources which when taken together provide a corroborative case."

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.



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

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 Shiromani of the Indian Motion Picture Producers

Association told AFP. Shiromani said the industry was "confused" and found it hard to believe allegations of Shah's links with the mafia.

"He used to make all payments by cheques. It is impossible for producers to find out the sources of funds of financiers," Shah was India's most high-profile film financier. He is also a top diamond merchant. Shah is also one of the partners in entertainment conglomerate and television channel B4U which has drawn up big plans to enter the domestic film and television software production sector. 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: Newly-wed 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 Maha 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," 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.

Tiananmen crackdown was 'highly necessary': China

BEIJING, Jan 9: The Tiananmen Square massacre was "highly necessary" to the stability and development of China, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said early today, reports AFP.

In the first response by Beijing to the leaking of top secret Chinese government papers about the suppression of the 1989 pro-democracy protests, Zhu Bangzao called the military's slaughter of more than 1,000 demonstrators "prompt and decisive."

Quoted by the state news agency Xinhua, Zhu Bangzao said Beijing "had already made a correct conclusion about the political disturbances that took place in Beijing at the end of the spring and the beginning of the summer in 1989 and that the conclusion would not change."

"Any attempt to play up the matter again and disrupt China by the despicable means of 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 who 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 minutes of the politburo meetings put an accusing finger at former premier Li Peng as the strongest advocate of sending the army against the students on the eve of June 4.

They also show officials squabbling as they buffeted late patriarch Deng Xiaoping with conflicting advice. Deng himself is shown as fearing the entire regime will fall apart if the protests were allowed to continue.

But on Tuesday Zhu stressed the communist party, "with President Jiang Zemin at its core," was united.

The conservative wing of the Communist Party does not emerge well from the documents while more moderate figures such as Qiao Shi, a sidelined rival of Jiang, and Li Ruihuan, currently number four in the hierarchy, emerge with some credit.

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 credentials.

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 and the good 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 on as head of the powerful Central Military Commis-

sion.

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 heating 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.

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 failed 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.