

International



Bush nominee withdraws from cabinet

WASHINGTON, Jan 9: US President-elect George W. Bush suffered the first setback in his cabinet formation process Tuesday as Labour Secretary-designate Linda Chavez withdrew her nomination after admitting to harbouring an illegal immigrant, reports AFP.

Citing what she called "the politics of personal destruction" in Washington, and slamming the press for blowing the story out of proportion, Chavez said she had become "a distraction."

"I believe that I would have made a great secretary of labour," she said, but added: "I have decided that I have become a distraction, and, therefore, I have asked President Bush to withdraw my name as secretary of labour."

Bush said in a statement that he was "disappointed that Linda Chavez will not become our nation's next secretary of labour."

Chavez, 53, admitted that she knowingly took Marta Mercado, a battered illegal immigrant from Guatemala, into her home in the early 1990s upon a friend's request.

She said many people had helped her through difficult times when she was growing up and when her parents were ill, "and I vowed to myself that no matter what happened to me in my life, I would be there for other people," she said.

Junta-Suu Kyi talks bring hope for Myanmar

BANGKOK, Jan 10: Secret talks between Myanmar's junta and the opposition led by Aung San Suu Kyi won a cautious welcome today as world leaders urged the bitter enemies to strive towards national reconciliation, reports AFP.

Dissident groups also responded warmly to the news that several meetings with junta number-three Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt had paved the way for an official dialogue that could end a decade of political stalemate.

Amid a growing sense of cautious optimism over the initiative, spearheaded by UN envoy Razali Ismail, analysts warned the process would now proceed slowly, and probably while Aung San Suu Kyi remained under house arrest.

Razali, who has been attempting to bring the bitter adversaries together for the first time since 1994, revealed Tuesday that the process of bridging Myanmar's political divide had begun.



"There have been talks between Aung San Suu Kyi and the Myanmar government which started towards the end of last year," he said.

UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said Secretary General Kofi Annan was "encouraged to learn that during his mission, Mr Razali was able to confirm that the two sides had started a direct dialogue since last October."

"The two sides are expected to start more substantive discussions shortly."

Annan "reiterates his call for the two sides to seize the momentum and work for national reconciliation."

Razali left Yangon Tuesday after a five-day visit where he met with a number of top generals and was also twice permitted to see Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest since September 22.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright welcomed news of the breakthrough and applauded the role played by Razali, a veteran Malaysian diplomat who has won the confidence of Myanmar's warring sides.

"One of the things that we have wanted to have is the establishment of such a dialogue," she said. "Obviously this is something that we will have to see where it leads and whether it is a genuine dialogue."

Vajpayee arrives in Indonesia

JAKARTA, Jan 10: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee arrived here today for a five-day official visit to Indonesia on the second leg of a Southeast Asian tour, reports AFP.

The plane carrying Vajpayee touched down at 2:40 pm (1340 BST) at Jakarta's Halim Perdanakusuma airport, an AFP reporter said.

He was welcomed by President Abdurrahman Wahid, Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab and military chief Admiral Widodo Adisucipto.

Vajpayee's visit to Indonesia, the first by an Indian leader in 14 years, follows a three-day visit to Vietnam.

During his stay, Vajpayee is scheduled to hold talks with Wahid and also meet with Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri and House Speaker Akbar Tanjung.

He will also meet with the chairman of the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Aburizal Bakri.

The foreign ministry said Vajpayee would also witness the signing of bilateral agreements in the fields of cultural exchanges, science and technology, agriculture and defence and on the formation of an Indonesia-India joint commission.

Vajpayee will end his visit with a trip to the predominantly Hindu resort island of Bali on January 12 to visit the Gandhi Ashram and other temples before leaving for home on January 14.

Indian team to discuss N-risk reduction with Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Jan 10: Indian and Pakistani delegates will discuss nuclear risk reduction at a three day-meet beginning in Islamabad next week, despite bilateral political dialogue being frozen for more than a year, reports AFP.

A six-member Indian delegation comprising former diplomats and defence officers, is all set to leave for Islamabad on Friday to attend a meeting hosted by a Pakistani think-tank, the Islamabad Policy Research Institute.

"Our talks and discussion papers will deal with nuclear risk reduction and corollary issues," retired Rear Admiral Raja Menon, one of the members of the Indian delegation said.

"It is an autonomous exercise ... we are not carrying any formal brief from the government," former foreign secretary J.N. Dixit told AFP.

This would be the second exchange between the experts since last November.

The group was constituted under the provisions of a bilateral memorandum signed by India and Pakistan in Lahore in February 1999.

Under its provisions, a non-governmental working group was to be constituted by both countries, "to reduce the risk of an accidental nuclear conflict and suggest confidence building measures related to nuclear risk reduction," said Dixit.

The members of the Indian delegation are hoping that "Track II" diplomacy can promote confidence-building measures that could be taken up with the eventual resumption of a full political dialogue.

A meeting between Pakistan's Chief Executive Pervez Musharraf and the Indian team is "unlikely", but the group could meet the Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdus Sattar.

Analysts say the delegation-level exchanges have an important role.

"The subject of nuclear risk reduction is of interest not only to us, but also watched by the US, many western countries and Russia," said B.G. Verghese of the Delhi based Centre for

Policy Research.

The visit comes at a time when the Indian government is considering issuing travel documents to members of a top political separatist alliance from Indian Kashmir to travel to Pakistan.

Senior Indian leaders have of late been talking about the resumption of the Indo-Pakistan political dialogue "sometime soon."

Relations between India and Pakistan have been strained for more than 50 years over the Himalayan territory of Kashmir, which is claimed by both and divided between them.

New Delhi accuses Islamabad of fomenting insurgency in the Indian-administered zone of Kashmir, where the Muslim separatist movement has claimed more than 34,000 lives since 1989.

Pakistan denies the charge but extends moral and diplomatic support to what it terms the legitimate Kashmiri struggle for self-rule.

Israeli minister meets Arafat to renew security cooperation

JERUSALEM, Jan 10: Israeli security cabinet member Amnon Lipkin-Shahak admitted that he held a secret meeting in Gaza City Tuesday night with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in a bid to end the ongoing violence, reports AFP.

"I met Yasser Arafat with the aim of reducing the violence and bringing back a normal reality to the region, but this is not an easy mission," Lipkin-Shahak told public radio Wednesday, confirming a report of the meeting in Haaretz, the Israeli daily.

Lipkin-Shahak indicated that following the session with Arafat "meetings between Israeli and

Palestinian security service officials would take place on the ground today or in the coming days."

He said that he hoped "we'll be able to quickly verify a reduction in the amount of violence."

Asked about a statement of principle by US President Bill Clinton on future peace talks, Lipkin-Shahak said a declaration had been approved by both the Israelis and Palestinians.

"It would serve the purpose of being a starting point for future negotiations. But without an accord, a declaration would have little political worth," he cautioned.

The Israelis had hoped for a limited accord before Clinton leaves office on January 20, but the Palestinians have insisted any accord should be comprehensive and end the conflict between the two sides.

Haaretz reported Wednesday that Arafat has insisted that continuing security talks should be accompanied by a resumption of a political dialogue.

Besides the Arafat and Lipkin-Shahak meeting, Israeli and Palestinian security officials also met secretly in Ramallah Tuesday night, Palestinian sources said, without disclosing information on the meeting.

Laden attends his son's wedding

DUBAI, Jan 10: Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden has celebrated the wedding in Afghanistan of his son to the daughter of one of his aides, according to Qatar's al-Jazeera television which today broadcast footage of the ceremony, reports Reuters.

The footage, which al-Jazeera said was exclusive to it, showed bin Laden sitting on a carpeted floor in a tent surrounded by his son, Mohammad, and other men.

Al-Jazeera said the Muslim ceremony during which bin Laden often smiled and shook hands with the other unidentified men took place on Tuesday in the southern Afghan town of Kandahar.

Bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi dissident believed to be living in Afghanistan, has been accused by the United States of masterminding 1998 attacks on two US embassies in Africa.

A senior Yemeni security official said on Tuesday that a suspect arrested recently had confessed that bin Laden was linked to the apparent suicide bombing last October of the destroyer USS Cole at Aden port that killed 17 US sailors.

The United States has named bin Laden as one of the suspects in the bombing. Bin Laden has denied involvement in the attack.

Militant groups call strike on India's Republic Day

GUWAHATI, India, Jan 10: A dozen separatist militant groups in India's northeast called today a general strike for Republic Day on January 26 to protest against "colonial rule" in the region, reports AFP.

In a joint statement, banned rebel groups in six of the seven northeastern states said they would enforce an 18-hour general strike beginning midnight January 25 as a mark of protest against the "brutality of Indian occupational forces."

"To all the people of our region, this (Republic Day) is an event that symbolises their colonial bondage under repressive Indian occupation," the statement said.

"We call upon the people to prevent any such celebration from being held."

The frontline militant groups that have called for the boycott include the United Liberation Front of Assam, National Socialist Council of Nagaland,

National Liberation Front of Tripura and National Democratic Front of Bodoland.

Since India's independence in 1947, rebel groups have regularly boycotted India's Republic and Independence Day holidays as a mark of protest.

Federal troops have been put on alert across the region, with intelligence reports suggesting that militants might try and attack vital installations in the run-up to Republic Day.

"We have intensified patrol around possible targets like road bridges, railway tracks and oil installations", an army commander in Assam said requesting anonymity.

Militants in the past have carried out serial bomb blasts and ambushes on security patrols before and during Republic Day.

More than 25,000 people have lost their lives to militancy in the northeast during the past five-decades.

Pak security forces seize US-made missiles

ISLAMABAD, Jan 10: Pakistani security forces seized 13 US-made missiles smuggled into the Mohmand tribal area from Afghanistan, reports said today, reports DPA.

A government statement quoted by the reporters said a border patrol stumbled upon the arms cache in the Ghilzai hills of the Mohmand region after a group of suspicious-looking tribals fled from a ravine.

During a search of the area, the patrol found 13 US-made missiles, which had a range of 25 kilometers.

Lanka to lift moratorium on death penalty

COLOMBO, Jan 10: The government has decided to resume executions after 24 years to fight rising levels of crime, a government official said today, reports AP.

Prison chiefs have been ordered to ready the gallows since 55 prisoners are facing death penalty in the island nation, the official said on condition of anonymity.

The government decision drew protest from London-based Amnesty International.

"Death penalty is a brutalizing punishment, ineffective and a gross human rights violation," the human rights group said in a statement.

Sri Lankan courts have been handing out death sentences to convicts as the government kept the punishment on the statute book. A moratorium was declared in 1977 and no executions have been carried out since then.

Malaysia seeks stronger military ties with US

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 10: Malaysia, which sees potential security threats from unrest in Indonesia and the Philippines, said today it is seeking stronger military cooperation with the United States, reports AFP.

Deputy Defence Minister Mohamad Shafie Apdal held talks on regional security with visiting Admiral Dennis Blair, commander in chief of the US Pacific Command.

"I reminded him that the cooperation that exists...should be increased," Shafie told a press conference afterwards, without elaborating.

Shafie said the talks focused on the security situation in Indonesia and the Philippines. They followed a briefing for Blair by Malaysian intelligence officials.

"The US was concerned about ensuring a peaceful region," he said.

Shafie said Blair asked if Malaysia was strengthening

border security following two kidnappings last year by Filipino Muslim gunmen from resort islands off eastern Sabah state.

I told him we are always on alert and have boosted troop presence in the border areas such as along the Kalimantan area (on Borneo Island)," Shafie said.

Deputy army chief Lieutenant-General Abdul Aziz Hassan said Monday the number of troops deployed in Sarawak and in neighbouring Sabah state on Borneo needed to be increased because of security threats from Indonesia and the Philippines.

Officials said Malaysia would send 1,600 extra troops to Sarawak.

Shafie said he proposed to Blair that US troops train at the jungle warfare school in the southern state of Johor. Soldiers from Australia, Britain and New Zealand along with Malaysians train at the school.



Igino Lazzaretti (L) and Giovanni Cadei tape cans together on Tuesday to complete a reproduction of Rome's Coliseum made up with 2 millions cans of soda in a suburb of Rome. The 1:5 model has a maximum height of 10.5 metres and a main axis of 31.20 metres. Some 30 volunteers have been working on it for three months.

-- AFP photo

Gulshan Kumar murder Hitman arrested in Kolkata

KOLKATA, India, Jan 10: Police in the eastern Indian city of Kolkata were today preparing to hand over the alleged killer arrested for the 1997 murder of a film mogul to their Bombay counterparts, reports AFP.

Banibrata Basu, Calcutta's deputy police commissioner, said Bombay's joint commissioner D. Sivanandan, would travel to Kolkata to escort back hitman Abdur Rauf, arrested late Tuesday for the murder of Gulshan Kumar.

Kumar, a flamboyant tycoon, was gunned down on August 12, 1997 shortly after he left a Hindu temple in Bombay after offering morning prayers.

He had eight films to his credit and had built up a business empire worth 222 million dollars based on audio cassettes after starting life as a humble fruit seller in New Delhi.

Kolkata police said Rauf was a hitman for the Dubai-based Bombay underworld don Daud Ibrahim who fled India after serial bombings in Bombay in 1993. Ibrahim's men are thought to be in hiding in Pakistan and Thailand.

Basu said a raid on Rauf's flat revealed fake passports with which he and his wife travelled to Pakistan, Thailand and Kenya.

Police said Rauf, 29, had confessed that Ibrahim had hired him to kill Kumar and had paid him 100,000 rupees (2,127 dollars) as the first tranche of the payment.

Rauf also said he staged two other contract killings in Bombay and said he had been advised by another underworld ganglord Chhota Shakeel to lie low in Kolkata as it was a "safe place."