

Pakistan, India to discuss reopening of rail link

LAHORE, Pakistan, Jan 11: Officials from bitter rivals Pakistan and India will meet in New Delhi next week for talks on resuming a cross-border rail link, officials said today, reports AFP.

A five-member Pakistani delegation will leave for India on Monday for talks with their counterparts in Indian rail, they said. "The visit is to revalidate the existing agreement on running the Samjhauta Express," Pakistan Railways additional general manager Abdul Qayyum told AFP. Qayyum, who will lead the Pakistani side, said the talks starting on Tuesday would last several days.

"We are confident the talks will be smooth as there is no controversy," he said.

British girl kidnapped in Philippines

ZAMBOANGA, Jan 11: Four suspected Muslim extremists kidnapped a 6-year-old British girl at gunpoint in the southern Philippines after her mother could not meet their demand for cash, the military said today, report AP.

The four suspected members of the Abu Sayyaf separatist group entered the home of Philippine national Nina Rasul Grant on Wednesday evening and demanded 100,000 pesos (dlsr 2,000), army spokesman Maj. Fredesvindo Covarrubias said.

The woman said she only had 1,000 pesos (dlsr 20), so the men pointed assault rifles at her, grabbed her daughter April and fled down the near by Bubawan river on two motorised outriggers, Covarrubias said.

He said the Grants lived in Lamitan town on Basilan island, some 900 kilometers south of Manila, while they were waiting to join the girl's father, Frank Grant, who is currently in Scotland.

Israeli-Palestinian joint patrols to resume soon

Israel reopens roads, crossing points in Gaza

JERUSALEM, Jan 11: Joint patrols by the Israeli army and Palestinian police will resume shortly in the West Bank and Gaza, Israeli public radio reported early today, reports AFP.

The decision was taken at a meeting of Israeli and Palestinian security officials at the Erez Crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel. The meeting was aimed at bringing calm to the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Israel, sources close to the talks said.

The radio described the talks as a "success," quoting Israeli delegation leader Transport Minister Amnon Lipkin-Shahak.

The joint patrols in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, set up under the 1993 Oslo agreements, had ceased to function after the Palestinian Intifada or uprising

started three months ago.

The radio reported that the results of the talks would be reviewed by Israeli caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Barak's "peace cabinet," those people that have been most closely involved in peace talks with the Palestinians.

The report did not say when that meeting would be held.

The Israeli delegation was headed by Lipkin-Shahak, who is a reserve general and former chief of staff. It included Avraham Dichter, head of the Shin Beth intelligence service and the Israeli military commanders for the southern and central districts, Generals Dror Almog and Yitahak Eitan.

The Palestinian delegation was headed by chief peace negotiator Saeb Erakat.

Earlier Wednesday, a Palestin-

ian official speaking on condition of anonymity told AFP that the meeting would be held following talks overnight between Lipkin-Shakak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army reopened the main north-south road in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian territory's crossing point with Egypt today, witnesses and Palestinian security officials told AFP.

A Palestinian official said the Allenby Bridge linking the West Bank and Jordan river had also been reopened in the wake of a high-level joint security meeting late Wednesday.

Israeli soldiers also lifted their blockade at the Netzarim crossing outside Gaza City, a flashpoint of violence during the 15-week Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation.



US President-elect George W. Bush (C) is greeted on his arrival at the Pentagon by Secretary of Defence William Cohen and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Hugh Shelton on Wednesday. With them is Secretary of State-designate Colin Powell (2ndL), Vice president-elect Dick Cheney (2ndR) and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice (R).

--AFP photo

Six go on trial for killing UN workers in W Timor

JAKARTA, Jan 11: Six people went on trial here today for the savage killings of three UN aid workers who were hacked to death in West Timor in September, reports AFP.

The trials of the five East Timorese and one West Timorese opened in two separate court-rooms amid tight security at the North Jakarta district court.

The six are charged with manslaughter or violence leading to the death of the UNHCR staffers - an American, a Croatian and an Ethiopian -- whose killings sparked an international outcry.

The UN Security Council has demanded that the perpetrators of the attack on the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the West Timor border town of Atambua to be brought to justice.

"The actions of the defendants and other people, caused damage to an office and the death of three staff of the UNHCR," prosecutor

Fardan Rachim told one court.

He was trying the case involving East Timorese Xisto Pereira, 26, Serafin Ximenes, 26 and Joao Martins, 27, all accused of violence leading to the death of a person or persons -- a charge carrying up to 12 years in jail.

In the second trial West Timorese entrepreneur Julius Naisama, 30, and East Timorese farmers Jose Francisco, 35 and Joao Alves da Cruz, 26, have been charged with manslaughter -- carrying up to 15 years in jail.

The September attack led to the pullout of all foreign humanitarian workers from West Timor where more than 300,000 East Timorese sought refuge from the pro-Jakarta militia violence which erupted in East Timor in September 1999 after the people voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia.

6 shot dead in Yemen mosque attack

SANAA, Jan 11: Armed men shot dead six Muslims and wounded 10 others knelt in prayer at a mosque in Yemen after a stormy debate about forthcoming elections, the first in the Arab country in a decade, witnesses said today, reports AFP.

The attack Wednesday night at Dhibin, in Omran province, 90 kilometres north of the capital, sounded an early warning about the passions the February 20 municipal ballot could unleash.

After the debate among village elders broke up over candidates, several participants went to pray in the village mosque, witnesses told AFP.

Two gunmen burst in and opened fire on the faithful with automatic weapons.

"Seven of the wounded were hit in the head and are in a serious condition," said a hospital

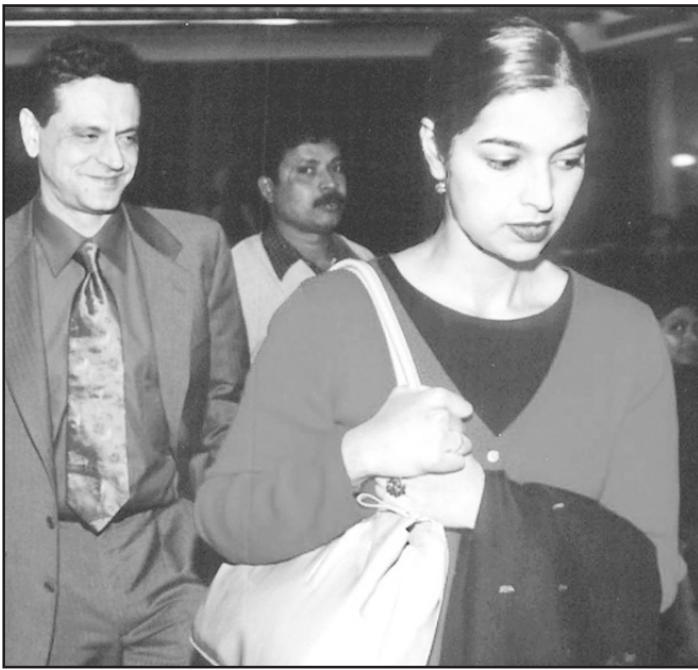
official in Sanaa, where they were being treated. "The chances of survival for most of them are small."

The two killers, both men from the village, fled after the massacre, a local tribal leader said, but refused to name them.

It was the first bloody incident linked to the municipal elections, the first since the north and south re-united in 1990, and for which official campaigning is not due to start until early February.

They are due to take place at the same time as a referendum to amend the constitution, which the opposition will try to block.

The five leading opposition parties, including the Socialist Party of former south Yemen, are to put forward joint candidates for the municipal ballot and together oppose the amendments, according to an internal document obtained by AFP.



Pulitzer Prize winning writer Jhumpa Lahiri (R) arrives for a press conference along with her American fiance Alberto Vourvoulias (L) in Calcutta on Wednesday. Lahiri, winner of the Pulitzer for her work 'Interpreter of Maladies', a collection of stories last year, announced her marriage to Vourvoulias. Jhumpa and her fiance intend to have a traditional Bengali marriage in Calcutta.

--AFP photo

Li Peng arrives in New Delhi

NEW DELHI, Jan 11: Li Peng, the second-highest ranking Chinese leader, arrived in New Delhi today for the official leg of a nine-day visit aimed at cementing ties after a rift caused by New Delhi's 1998 nuclear tests, reports AFP.

Li, accompanied by wife, flew into the capital from Bombay, where he arrived on Tuesday.

The former Chinese premier and current parliamentary chairman was scheduled to meet Vice-President Krishan Kant later Thursday.

He will also hold talks with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and opposition leader Sonia Gandhi and address a leading Indian trade forum during his stay here.

A group of about 40 Tibetan activists unsuccessfully tried to waylay Li's motorcade as it moved from the airport to his hotel.

Blocked by police, the protesters finally managed to disrupt traffic by squatting in the road after the motorcade had passed.

A senior Delhi police official told AFP that they were aware the Tibetans would try to "disrupt" Li's visit.

"We have taken all necessary precautions to prevent any distress to the visiting dignitary," he said.

A heavy security cordon was thrown along the entire route from the airport to the hotel, which was guarded by several police detachments.

Assam police thwart planned bomb attacks

GUWAHATI, India, Jan 11: Police in northeast India said today they had seized weapons and explosives destined for separatist rebel groups intent on disrupting Republic Day celebrations on January 26, reports AFP.

An unidentified tribal rebel was shot dead in downtown Guwahati, capital of Assam state, around midnight Wednesday in an encounter with a security patrol.

"A sizeable quantity of very high explosives and some sophisticated small weapons were recovered," said Guwahati police superintendent G.P. Singh.

Singh said the explosives were most likely intended for Republic Day rebel operations.

In another incident, police in the neighbouring state of Meghalaya arrested a Mymmarese woman with a huge consignment of weapons.

Cambodia Senate starts Khmer Rouge trial debate

PHNOM PENH, Jan 11: Cambodia's Senate began debating legislation today to bring to trial former leaders of the Khmer Rouge, which is accused of killing an estimated 1.7 million people when it held power in the 1970s, reports Reuters.

"I expect that the draft law will be finished tomorrow if there is not much discussion," Ouk Bunchhouen, chairman of the Senate's legislative committee, told reporters.

"If they think the law is good enough, they will approve it very quickly... Once it is approved. I will send it to the Constitutional Council very quickly."

Cambodia agreed in April last year on how to try former leaders of the radical communist group, which held sway from 1975-79 and has been blamed for Cambodia's "killing fields" and other atrocities.

Many diets ineffective in the long run

WASHINGTON, Jan 11: With the majority of weight-loss programmes, it's a case of extra pounds gone today and back tomorrow, according to a report by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), reports AFP.

The agency said many diets are ineffective in the long run, unless they hinge on reducing caloric intake and maintaining those habits over the long haul.

"It is the total calories consumed -- rather than how much fat, carbohydrates and protein (the nutrient composition of a diet) are consumed -- that is the major determinant of weight loss," said the USDA report issued Wednesday.

"The analysis found that individuals on a moderate-fat, high-carbohydrate diet ... were more likely to maintain weight loss," added the report, which groups research from the past few years on several popular diets.

Even if a dieter does not exercise, it said, "diets that reduce caloric intake result in weight loss."

But it cautioned that some diets cause a deceptive loss of water weight rather than body fat. "Water weight is regained when the diet ends," the USDA said, adding however that, "if the diet is maintained long-term, it results in loss of body fat."

The battle over weight loss is an ongoing struggle in the United States, where about 20 percent of adults and 15 to 20 percent of children suffer from obesity. Some 300,000 people die each year of illnesses and complications linked to the condition.



Chairman of China's National People's Congress Li Peng (C), surrounded by Indian officials, waves to photographers upon his arrival in New Delhi yesterday. Li is on a nine-day official visit to India.

--AFP photo

'Benazir will be arrested if she returns home'

KARACHI, Jan 11: Pakistan's military regime today threatened to arrest former prime minister Benazir Bhutto if she returns from self-exile in London as planned, reports AFP.

"Benazir is a convict and the law will take its own course," military spokesman Major General Rashid Qureshi told AFP.

"There is no question of any deal with Benazir or her Pakistan People's Party (PPP)."

Benazir has lived in exile since just before her conviction in April 1999 for taking kick-backs on government contracts. She was sentenced to five years and fined millions of dollars, but her appeal is pending in the Supreme Court.

The PPP Wednesday announced she would return to Pakistan to fill the political vacuum created by last month's sudden exile to Saudi Arabia of

her imprisoned rival, ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Sharif, toppled in a coup in October 1999 by General Pervez Musharraf, was pardoned of lengthy prison terms and sent into exile under an arrangement keeping him out of politics for a decade.

"Benazir will return in the near future. This decision has been taken," PPP deputy secretary general Raza Rabbani said.

"Benazir Bhutto went abroad with the permission of the court and she will be accorded a historic welcome by the people of Pakistan when she comes back."

He said the exact date of her return would be announced after a three-week "mobilisation campaign" but he did not say when that would start.

Musharraf has condemned both former leaders as corrupt and incompetent and vowed to

keep them out of politics.

Qureshi denied rumours that the regime has held talks with the PPP about the return of Benazir, the daughter of one of Pakistan's most influential political families.

"I don't think there is any truth of any talks with the PPP over Benazir's return," he said, referring to Rabbani's claim that a senior army official had contacted the party.

Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League hailed Benazir's plan to end her exile as yet another step in the opposition campaign to revive parliament, which was suspended after the 1999 coup, and restore democracy.

"Her return will be a welcome sign for politics," senior PML leader Raja Zafarul Haq told AFP. "Political leaders' presence in the country is needed."

UN war crimes tribunal indicts former Bosnian Serb president

THE HAGUE, Jan 11: The UN war crimes tribunal for the former Yugoslavia formally indicted former Bosnian Serb president Biljana Plavsic on Wednesday after she surrendered to the court, a court spokesman said here, reports AFP.

"I confirm that Ms Plavsic was the object of a sealed indictment and has surrendered this morning to the tribunal," spokesman Christian Chartier told a press conference.

Plavsic, the first woman to be indicted on charges stemming from the Bosnian conflict, was charged with genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity dating to 1991 and 1992, the spokesman said.

During that period, she was a close ally to then-Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, who remains at large despite a similar long-standing indictment.

Plavsic, president from 1996-98, is the highest-ranking politician to face charges brought by the tribunal, set up to track down and prosecute perpetrators of atrocities committed during the conflict that led to the former Yugoslavia's break-up.

According to the indictment, she was "individually responsible for the crimes alleged against her in this indictment."

The document said that along with Karadzic, Plavsic "initiated and implemented a course of conduct which included the creation of impossible conditions of life, involving persecution and terror tactics, that would have the effect of encouraging non-Serbs to leave, the deportation of those who were reluctant to leave and the liquidation of others."

Plavsic, 70, is set to appear before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for the first time on Thursday at 1000 GMT, the spokesman added. She is expected to enter a plea at that time.

The former biology teacher was on the ICTY's secret list of suspects. Those on the list are only revealed once they have been arrested and indicted.

Carla del Ponte, the ICTY's chief prosecutor, said the indictment was issued under seal on April 7, 2000, for crimes committed jointly with former Bosnian Serb assembly leader Momcilo Krajisnik.

Krajisnik, who has been in ICTY custody since April, is accused of being responsible for

genocide committed against Bosnia's non-Serb population.

Del Ponte said she would seek a joint trial for Plavsic and Krajisnik.

Plavsic reportedly flew to The Hague on Tuesday, according to friends and officials in her party.

She surrendered freely and willingly, said Del Ponte, who appeared at the press conference along with Krstan Simic, Plavsic's chief attorney.

The NATO-led Stabilisation Force (SFOR) in Bosnia hailed Plavsic's surrender on Wednesday, with one SFOR spokesman calling it a "courageous decision".

She was reportedly told of her indictment last month by the US ambassador to Bosnia, the daily Nezavisne Novine reported Wednesday.

Many considered Plavsic lucky to have escaped indictments similar to those levelled at Karadzic and former Bosnian army commander Ratko Mladic for so long, as she was part of the Bosnian Serb high command from the earliest stages of the 1992-95 conflict.