

International

No date set for Indo-Pak summit: Vajpayee

JAKARTA, Jan 12: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said today no date had been set for a visit to New Delhi by Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, reports Reuters.

Asked by Reuters about media reports suggesting the Pakistan leader was ready to visit India for a dialogue to try to end a long-running territorial dispute over Kashmir, Vajpayee said: "I've seen the report, but no date has been fixed as yet."

Asked if that meant Musharraf would go, Vajpayee said: "Even that is not final."

"That is a question that should be directed to him. How do I know when he will come?" he added. Vajpayee is now on a visit to Indonesia.

Junior foreign minister Ajit Panja, however, ruled out any imminent visit.

"There is no plan (for Musharraf's visit). Our policy remains constant and until conditions are there for peaceful talks, until terrorism stops, it is not possible to talk for peace," Panja, who was accompanying Vajpayee, told Reuters.

Vajpayee did not say which media report he was referring to. He was scheduled to fly to the Indonesian resort island of Bali today before heading back to India at the weekend.

US air force plane crashes in S Korea

SEOUL, Jan 12: A US Air Force Thunderbolt A-10 jet crashed Friday into a greenhouse complex near the Pongtaek air base in southern South Korea but the pilot ejected moments beforehand, police said, reports AFP.

A fire caused by the crash damaged about 990 square meters of vinyl greenhouses used for growing vegetables.

Firemen rushed to the scene to put out the blaze, but were held back because of the explosives in the fighter jet.

Korean officials said the crash happened as the pilot attempted to land at the US air base.

Underground bunker found below Suharto's house

JAKARTA, Jan 12: Indonesian police have detected an underground bunker below the central Jakarta home of former President Suharto's fugitive son, Hutomo "Tommy" Mandala Putra, a police official said today.

"We picked up georadar signals of a bunker below Tommy's house. We are going to try to open it today," an officer at national police headquarters, requesting anonymity, told AFP.

"If we don't find the entrance, we will force our way in, using special tools," he added without elaborating.

Forensics police armed with georadar detectors scanned the grounds of the homes of the elder Suharto and his children on Wednesday and Thursday, in an effort to confirm the existence of interconnecting bunkers below the former first family's residences.

The Suharto family -- the elder Suharto and his six children -- have interconnecting houses in Jakarta's plush central suburb of Menteng.

It is believed that Tommy, 38, who has eluded arrest by police for more than two months, may be hiding out in one of the bunkers.

The billionaire former playboy businessman has been on the run since early November, when President Abdurrahman Wahid rejected his appeal for a pardon of a corruption conviction.

Another police source told the Astaga.com news service that several bunkers had been detected, 15 metres (52 feet) below the ground.

"All the rooms are interconnected. Now we're trying to locate the door that leads into the bunkers," the unnamed source was quoted as saying.

Madonna takes lessons to sound English

LONDON, Jan 12: Pop star Madonna is taking elocution lessons to develop an English accent, the Independent reported today, says AFP.

The move marks her increasing integration into British culture, according to the newspaper.

It follows the singer's marriage last month in a Scottish castle to British film director Guy Ritchie, with whom she has a home in London's fashionable Notting Hill district.

Patsy Rodenburg, senior voice coach at the National Theatre in London, told the Independent it could be a matter of weeks before Madonna sounds like an Englishwoman.

"It all depends on her ear. I imagine that given her background, she might be rather good."

Madonna's motive is that she wants to play British parts in films, the paper said.

China, India must work together for world peace: Li Peng

Sino-Indian friendship group to be set up

NEW DELHI, Jan 12: Li Peng, the second-highest ranking Chinese leader, kicked off talks with Indian politicians on Thursday by saying the world's two most populous countries had to work together for global peace, reports AFP.

"China and India do not pose any threat to each other as they share similar views on a multi-polar world in which both can play their roles for world peace and development," Li told Indian parliamentarians.

"It is China's consistent stand that a multi-polar world is better than a unipolar world. India has the potential to grow into a pole herself."

New Delhi has consistently expressed concern over Chinese military assistance to Pakistan, saying this had worsened tensions in

the troubled subcontinent. Li, however, told Indian MPs there was no nuclear assistance to Pakistan, with whom Beijing has long-standing ties.

"There is traditional friendship between China and Pakistan which we are using for economic development," Li said.

Indian parliamentary speaker G.M. Balayogi told the Chinese leader that New Delhi was not engaged in "an arms race" and her nuclear tests in 1998 were "not directed against any country" but aimed at building a nuclear deterrent.

The nuclear tests caused a rift between the Asian giants.

In another sign both nations are making an effort to normalise

relations, Li also announced that China's parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC), would establish a Sino-Indian friendship group, the official Chinese Xinhua newsagency reported.

The group would invite members of the corresponding lobby in the Indian parliament to visit China, Li said, the agency added.

Li, the former Chinese premier and currently NPC chairman, flew into the Indian capital from Bombay, where he arrived on Tuesday for a nine-day visit across India.

Li Peng also held talks with Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh on the disputed Sino-Indian border today and stressed the need to improve relations between the two Asian giants.

Singh held a 45-minute meeting with Li at his hotel suite.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Singh said: "We spoke of the need to promote future good relations between India and China which are two ancient civilisations."

When asked if the border issue -- the cause of a brief but bitter war in 1962 -- was discussed, he replied: "Yes, that was also a part of the discussions."

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



Chairman of China's National People's Congress Li Peng (C) introduces his wife Zhu Lin (R) to Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi prior to their talks yesterday. --AFP photo

Nepali police kill seven Maoist rebels

KATHMANDU, Jan 12: At least seven Maoists, including a woman cadre, were killed in a clash with Nepalese police, officials said today, reports AFP.

"About seven insurgents were killed in the armed encounter between the rebels and police. Police later recovered arms, explosives and 15 homemade bombs belonging to the Maoists," a home ministry spokesman said.

One policeman was injured in the incident which took place at Phukot village in Kalikot district, 380 km northwest of the capital, the spokesman said.

According to sources, the Maoists had prohibited people from entering the village Thursday morning, claiming it belonged to their "Liberation Area."

In an immediate response police raided the area and fired at a group of around 80 Maoist insurgents, the source said.

'No breakthrough' in Israel-PA talks

Tel Aviv allows Gaza airport's limited reopening

GAZA CITY, Jan 12: A marathon meeting between Israeli and Palestinian officials ended early today with no breakthrough towards peace but an agreement to keep talking despite continued wide differences, both sides said, reports AFP.

"There was an agreement to hold meetings over the next two consecutive days," Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo told Voice of Palestine Radio after the talks at the Erez crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat told reporters that the negotiations would resume late Saturday.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's security adviser Danny Yatom told Israeli army radio there had been no breakthrough, but said this had not been expected, given the wide differences between the two sides.

"At least the negotiations were

not disastrous," Yatom said. US President Bill Clinton's peace proposals were centre stage during the more than five-hour meeting of senior Israeli and Palestinian officials.

"The goal of these discussions, which will focus on ideas presented by President Clinton, is to reach a framework solution for a definitive peace accord," said a Palestinian official, who spoke on condition of anonymity ahead of the talks.

Clinton, who leaves office on January 20, has been struggling to produce at least an agreed declaration of principles on his proposals.

But Abed Rabbo, the Palestinian information minister, said the Palestinians rejected such a statement.

"The Palestinian side expressed

a declaration of principles or interim agreement. What we want is a full agreement," he added.

The Israeli delegation at Erez consisted of Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami, Tourism and Transport Minister Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Gilad Sher, Barak's chief of staff.

The Palestinian side was represented by Ahmad Qorei, head of the Palestinian legislative council, top negotiator Saeb Erekat, Abed Rabbo and Gaza Strip preventative security chief Mohammad Dahlan.

The Clinton proposals call for Palestinian sovereignty over the Arab quarters of east Jerusalem and over the al-Aqsa mosque compound, as well as all of the Gaza Strip and 95 per cent of the West Bank.

In exchange for that, the Palestinians are being asked to renounce demands for a right to return to their homes in what is now Israel of an estimated 3.7 million refugees.

Indo-Pak experts meet today to discuss N-risk reduction

ISLAMABAD, Jan 12: Experts from South Asian rivals Pakistan and India will meet here Saturday to discuss ways of averting an accidental nuclear conflict, reports AFP.

A five-member Indian delegation of former diplomats and defence experts will attend a seminar on nuclear restraint and risk reduction in South Asia, sponsored by the non-governmental Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI).

IPRI spokesman Ifkhar Butt said on Friday scholars from both countries would present papers on the nuclear risks perceived by India and Pakistan, and their cooperation on nuclear proliferation issues.

He said the Indian team includes former foreign secretary J.N. Dixit, former diplomat K.S. Bajpai, retired Lieutenant General Vasantha R. Raghavan, retired Air Chief Marshal S.K. Mehra, retired Rear Admiral Raja Menon and a university professor, Mateen Zuberi.

They are also expected to meet Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar and Foreign Secretary Inamul Haq, foreign office officials said.

"The aim of the unofficial contact is to ease the atmosphere between the two countries," Butt said.

"It is part of confidence-building measures through people-to-people contact to bring down the level of tension and relax the political atmosphere."

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

India and Pakistan, who have fought three wars since 1947, two of them over the divided Himalayan state of Kashmir, conducted tit-for-tat nuclear tests in May 1998, triggering an international uproar and US-led sanctions.

They initiated a political dialogue in February 1999 when Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari

Vajpayee held a historic summit with his then counterpart Nawaz Sharif in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore.

The process fell apart months later after a bloody border conflict broke out on the peaks of Kargil in Kashmir.

Under US pressure and fearing a major nuclear confrontation, Sharif eventually ordered forces to withdraw from Kargil, triggering a dispute with the military which eventually toppled him in a coup in October 1999.

Both countries have resisted international pressure to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, saying regional imperatives require a minimum nuclear deterrence.

Militant groups welcome Hurriyat team to Pakistan

MUZAFFARABAD, Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, Jan 12: Muslim militant groups on Friday welcomed the makeup of a team of India-based Kashmiri separatist leaders who have applied to visit Pakistan later this month, reports AFP.

The team from the All Party Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference, the main separatist alliance based on the Indian side of the divided Himalayan state, is planning to visit on January 15 if India grants them travel documents.

Militant groups applauded the Hurriyat leaders for balancing the five-man team with representatives who favour Kashmir's accession to Pakistan and those who want Kashmir's independence.

"The team is balanced. There were rumours that the separatist house is divided between moderates and extremists but now this confusion is finished," Hizbul Mujahideen spokesman Salim Hashmi said.

The Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group, which has recently warned

Hurriyat leaders not to bring an "Indian agenda" when they visit Pakistan, was also satisfied with the team.

"These people undoubtedly have a role in the freedom struggle as they have been fighting on the political front," Lashkar-e-Taiba spokesman Abu Usama said.

The five executive members chosen for the proposed mission were Abdul Gani Lone and Omer Farooq, both pro-independence, Sheikh Abdul Aziz and Syed Ali Geelani (pro-Pakistan), and Abbas Ansari, who comes somewhere in the middle.

Only two -- Lone and Farooq -- hold valid travel documents.

"Now it depends on whether the Indian government will allow the delegation to go to Pakistan or not," Hurriyat executive council member Yasin Malik said late Thursday.

Six killed in Aceh violence

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, Jan 12: At least six people, including a soldier on guard at an Exxon-Mobil oil company complex were killed, and eight others injured in renewed violence in Indonesia's Aceh province, police and hospitals said today, reports AFP.

The killings Thursday and Friday brought the death toll related to violence between government and rebel forces to 35 since the start of the year, despite ongoing peace talks between the two sides in Geneva.

The soldier was killed late Friday in an attack on a military unit guarding the Exxon-Mobil natural gas complex at Lhokseumawe in North Aceh, senior police operations commissioner Kusubini Imbar told AFP.

Imbar was unable to give further details of the attack, saying he was still receiving reports from the field, but residents contacted by AFP said the shooting appeared to be the result of a clash between two government security units.

Exxon-Mobil, which produces

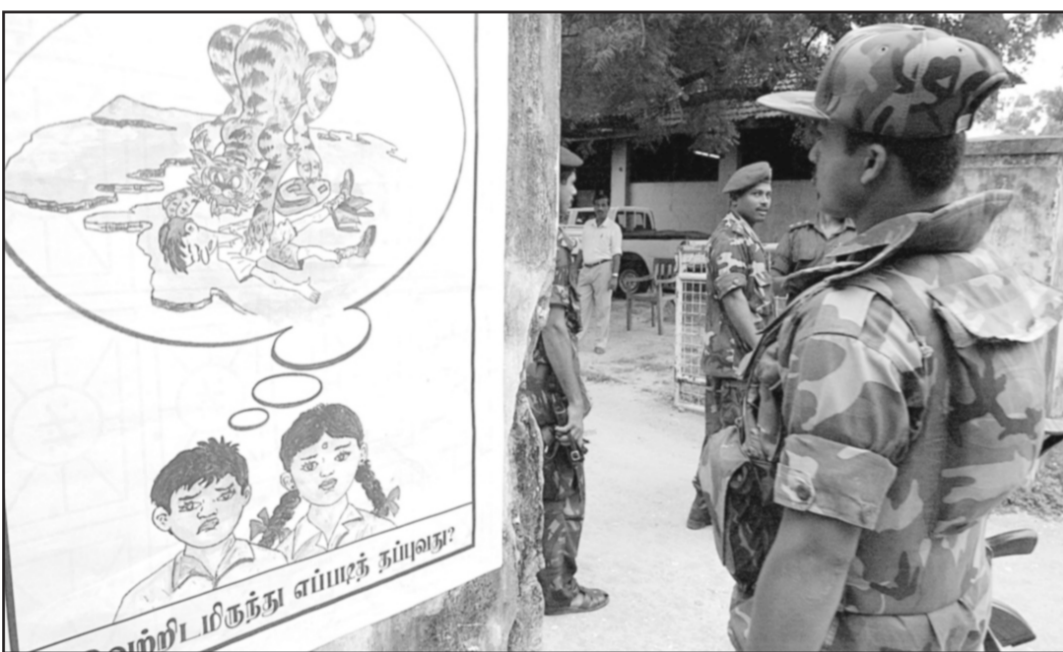
liquefied natural gas from the giant Arun field in Aceh, has been warned by the rebels to stop production "until we gain our independence."

Imbar said there had been a spate of rebel ambushes in North Aceh district on Friday, but that casualty reports from the field had yet to be received.

"In the last two days the GAM (Free Aceh Movement) has raised the level of violence, resulting in some 18 incidents of shooting and clashes province-wide," he said.

He said the bodies of four men were found on Thursday in East Aceh, the victims of unknown assassins, while government troops shot dead one suspected GAM member in North Aceh.

In the Nisam subdistrict of North Aceh, soldiers sweeping the area after being ambushed twice by GAM troops on Friday, shot and seriously wounded a six-year-old boy and a 16-year-old youth.



Sri Lankan troops guard a government building on Thursday in the northern Jaffna Peninsula where a poster denouncing recruitment of children by Tamil Tiger rebels is displayed. Government forces launched a series of operations against Tamil Tiger rebels last month and re-took areas lost to the guerrillas early last year. --AFP photo

Norway envoy fails to break Lankan peace deadlock

COLOMBO, Jan 12: Norway's special envoy, Erik Solheim, left Colombo today after fresh talks with Sri Lankan leaders, but failed to revive the island's peace process, officials said, reports AFP.

Solheim on Thursday night met with President Chandrika Kumaratunga who made it clear that there would be no truce as demanded by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) before peace talks could begin, officials said.

"They had an encouraging discussion on the ongoing process of negotiations with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) with a view to taking the process forward," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

"In the meantime, there will be no ceasefire."

The foreign ministry said Solheim, who ended a brief two-day

visit Friday, was expected to hold further talks with the Tamil Tiger rebels and thereafter with the Colombo government.

Norway has been acting as a facilitator to bring the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government to the negotiating table for nearly two years. However, there has been no direct meeting between the two sides.

The LTTE declared a ceasefire from December 25 and urged the government to do the same to clear the way for talks. The government maintains that talks should precede any truce, a position reiterated to Solheim.

Solheim also met with Prime Minister Ranasinghe Wickrematunge who is advocating a hard-line against the LTTE and has been dismissive of attempts to talk peace with the Tigers.

The prime minister was quoted

as saying in the Lakbima newspaper that during a 45-minute meeting with Solheim and the Norwegian ambassador here, Jon Westberg, they did not discuss Norway's attempts to broker peace in Sri Lanka.

The prime minister said he spoke only with the Norwegian ambassador and uttered a "thank you" to Solheim when he was leaving.

Sri Lanka's Trade Minister Rauf Hakeem, who met with Solheim on Wednesday, said both the government and the Tigers were losing sight of the main objective of ending the war.

Hakeem, who represents a minority Muslim party in Kumaratunga's shaky coalition government, said he hoped there could be eventual peace talks exploiting the "window of opportunity" opened by Solheim.

Mahathir urges civil servants to work with govt

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 12: Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad urged civil servants Friday to shed pro-opposition sympathies and instead work with his government, claiming that Malaysia's prosperity could otherwise collapse within a few years, reports AFP.

"There are those who feel this government is not Islamic and reeks of corruption and cronyism," Mahathir said in a speech to senior government officials in charge of the civil service. "Such perceptions have yet to hinder our development efforts, but it is not a good sign."

The speech marked Mahathir's latest bid to shore up his power base since general elections in 1999, when ethnic Malay Muslims partly deserted his party and voted for the opposition, particularly an Islamic party, to show dissatisfaction with this rule.

The 800,000-strong civil service is the preserve of Malay Muslims, the dominant ethnic group and backbone of Mahathir's long-ruling United Malays National Organisation, which has traditionally stressed development over religion.

Mahathir said that Malaysia, which he has built into one of Southeast Asia's richest countries during his 19-year rule, will lose if the civil service stops serving the government which, since independence in 1957, has been run by his party.

"If it is allowed to fester, the first evidence of our country cracking and collapse will show rapidly," Mahathir said. "We can fall in two to three years."

Much disillusionment with Mahathir, both from Malays and the large Chinese and Indian minorities, stems from his sacking Anwar

Ibrahim as his deputy in 1998.

Many civil servants have since openly supported the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, which made big gains in the 1999 polls, and the National Justice Party headed by Azizah Ismail, Anwar's wife.

In December, scores of civil servants skipped work and cheered at an opposition rally outside a complex where government departments are housed in Kuala Lumpur.

In his speech, Mahathir took a customary swipe at the West, saying Malaysia would have to give up pro-Malay affirmative action and "become slaves" if foreigners gain control of the economy, still suffering from the 1997-98 Asian crisis, in the name of globalisation.

China smashes Islamic militant group

BEIJING, Jan 12: China has smashed an armed Islamic group responsible for a wave of terrorist attacks in the troubled northwestern region of Xinjiang, state media said today, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, in a separate report Amnesty International said China had executed two men accused of terrorist offences in Xinjiang after "grossly unfair judicial proceedings based on confessions extracted through torture".

The People's Court Daily said a "group of separatists" had been tried at a court in the town Korla in Xinjiang recently and their leader Alerken Abula had been sentenced to death.

The paper said Abula set up a group in 1993 that came to be known as the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Party of God and which had recruited 113 members across

Xinjiang.

The report said the group bought explosives and weapons, as well as a printing press, and was responsible for "a large number of terrorist actions." It did not give details.

It said the group's aim was to set up an Islamic state in Xinjiang, a majority Muslim region, and that a hit list of 32 mosque officials with allegiance to the government in Beijing had been uncovered.

The report said Abula and an unspecified number of accomplices had been arrested and had later admitted their guilt in police interrogation.

The Chinese authorities have launched a major crackdown on separatism in Xinjiang since the riots, recruiting the help of neighbouring central Asian republics, and announcing scores of executions.

Researchers create genetically modified monkey

PORTLAND, Oregon, Jan 12: Pushing science to the brink of altering humans, researchers have created the world's first genetically modified primate -- a baby rhesus monkey with jellyfish DNA that glows green in the dark, reports AP.

The Oregon Health Science University researchers who created ANDi -- for "inserted DNA," spelled backward -- said Thursday their goal is not to tinker with the human blueprint but to use monkeys in the laboratory to advance medical research and wipe out disease.

The idea is to engineer monkeys with genes known to cause disease in humans. Perhaps these monkeys could even be cloned, so that exact copies could be used to study drugs and other potential treatments without having to factor in genetic variation, said a researcher.

The researchers hope to introduce other genes in rhesus monkeys that could trigger diseases like Alzheimer's, diabetes, breast cancer or HIV. Then, those monkeys could be used in experiments aimed at blocking diseases at the genetic level.

"I think we're at an extraordinary moment in the history of humans," said Dr. Gerald Schatten, who is leading the research at the Oregon Regional Primate Centre.

Mice have been genetically modified in labs and used for medical research for decades, but ANDi proves that scientists can now successfully tinker with the chromosomes of a close genetic cousin to man.

"This is a step in the direction of working with an animal that is closer in biology to humans," said



Dr. Phyllis Leppert at the National Institutes of Health, which funded the research.

She said mice have their limits when scientists try to apply experimental results to humans. Rhesus monkeys, however, share roughly 95 per cent of their genes with humans, she noted.

ANDi's creation, detailed in Friday's issue of the journal Science, drew cautious and critical responses from scientists around the world.

ANDi was created the same way, but he received an extra gene while he was still an unfertilized egg. The gene is a harmless protein taken from jellyfish that gives off a fluorescent green light that can be seen only under a microscope.

Schatten and other researchers modified and then fertilized more than 200 rhesus monkey eggs. Forty embryos were produced and resulted in five pregnancies and three live births. Of the three baby monkeys, only ANDi proved to have the modified jellyfish gene. He was born in October.