

Li Peng asks India to bury the hatchet

NEW DELHI, Jan 13: Li Peng, China's second-highest leader, today urged India to bury memories of a 1962 war and long-running border dispute, to take the relationship between the Asian giants to "new heights," reports AFP.

Li, who arrived to Tibetan protests to deliver a speech at the India International Centre to select intellectuals, diplomats and reporters, stressed New Delhi and Beijing's historical links, spanning more than 1,000 years. "We agree that China and India are still lacking in mutual understanding and to achieve better understanding and trust is a pressing task," Li said. "While not shying away from the problems and differences between us, we hope that far-sighted statesmen of our two countries will demonstrate courage and will and make efforts to resolve these problems and differences."

The former premier and current chairman of China's parliament stressed that "problems ... left over from history should not become impediments" and called on both countries to "elevate relations to a new height in the 21st century."

India says China still holds 40,000 square kilometres of its territory in Kashmir, while Beijing lays claim to a wide swathe of territory in Arunachal Pradesh. The dispute triggered a brief but bitter border war in 1962 which shattered India's close ties with China and made a mockery of a then-prevalent popular slogan in India's national language Hindi, which translated as "India and China are brothers."

Li, who arrived in India Tuesday on a nine-day visit, the highest-level Chinese tour since New Delhi's shock nuclear tests in 1998 which soured relations, said his ongoing trip had been fruitful.

"It has been very, very successful and I am sure it will bring tangible benefits," he said.

He also underlined that China had consistently maintained a friendly posture.

"We have never taken India as a threat," he said. "We place emphasis on keeping good neighbourly and friendly relations with India ... Nor do we intend to pose a threat to other countries or seek a sphere of influence."

An Indian foreign ministry spokesman in New Delhi on Friday had said both sides agreed that the thorny border dispute needed to be resolved soon.

"He (Li) said that a good beginning had been made with the exchange of maps of line of actual control last year," the spokesman said of an imaginary line that delineates the two territories.



A police officer tries to prevent Tibetan protesters from displaying a banner during a demonstration in front of the India International Centre (IIC) in New Delhi, where Chairman of China's National People's Congress Li Peng was delivering a speech yesterday. Some 100 Tibetans staged a noisy anti-Chinese demonstration to denounce China's Tibet policy. --AFP photo

Vajpayee keen to attend Kumbh Mela

NEW DELHI, Jan 13: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is apparently keen to wash away his sins with tens of millions of Hindu pilgrims at the Great Kumbh Mela religious festival in northern India, reports AFP.

However, according to official sources quoted by The Statesman newspaper on Saturday, the Special Protection Group (SPG) responsible for Vajpayee's security is less than enthusiastic given the enormous logistical problems.

"It will also be a nightmare for the organisers, already hassled by threats from the (Muslim militant group) Lashkar-e-Taiba and sadhu (Hindu holy men) opposing five-star arrangements for foreigners," the Statesman said.

Held once every 12 years, the Maha Kumbh Mela (Great Kumbh Fair) is expected to draw up to 70 million Hindu devotees over its 42-day duration -- more than four times the number that attended the 1989 event.

To make matters worse, the prime minister reportedly wants to participate in the most auspicious day -- January 24 -- when as many as 30 million people are expected to take a purificatory dip at the spot where the holy Ganges and Yamuna rivers converge near the town of Allahabad.

A visit by Vajpayee would also have political implications.

Radical Hindu leaders are expected to use the event to announce dates for the construction of a temple -- devoted to the god Ram -- over the ruins of a mosque razed by Hindu fanatics in 1992 in the northern town of Ayodhya.

Clinton undergoes biopsy

WASHINGTON, Jan 13: President Bill Clinton on Friday underwent a biopsy Friday after doctors discovered a small skin lesion on his back during his annual physical examination at the Bethesda Naval hospital near Washington, reports AFP.

"The president has a small, flat spot on his back that was a little pearly, looked like a -- very suspicious for a basal cell skin cancer," doctor David Corbett told the press, adding that basal cell carcinoma is the most common type of skin cancer.

"It's a locally-growing type of skin cancer, not a threat to his health or anything," said Corbett, who conducted the examination.

The result of the biopsy should be known in a week's time, he said.

The president's physician, Admiral Connie Mariano also noted that the president's cholesterol level was above normal, but that Clinton, 54, was otherwise in good health.

Mariano recommended diet and exercise, as well as medication to lower Clinton's cholesterol level.



Reagan breaks hip in fall

LOS ANGELES, Jan 13: Former US President Ronald Reagan broke his right hip in a fall at his home on Friday evening and will undergo surgery in a California hospital, his office announced, reports AFP.

Reagan, who turns 90 on February 6, was listed in stable condition at St. John's Health Centre in Santa Monica, where he was brought after the accident, spokeswoman Sheri Lietzow said late Friday. "He is fully alert, in good humour and in stable condition," his chief of staff Joanne Drake said in a statement. His wife, Nancy Reagan, was at his side and doctors have placed restrictions on other visits.

Reagan, who was US president from 1981 to 1989, retreated from public life after revealing in November 1994 that he was suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Indian peace promoters arrive in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Jan 13: A six-member Indian delegation of former top ranking government and military officials has arrived in Pakistan to "continue the process of unofficial dialogue" between New Delhi and Islamabad sharing tense relations, reports published today said, reports DPA.

The team will lend efforts "to bringing the two countries closer to peace and pave the way for official dialogue," Islamabad-based newspaper The Nation reported.

The Indian intellectuals and former bureaucrats will discuss with Pakistani counterparts the nuclear issue, nuclear risk reduction and non-proliferation.

India and Pakistan tested nuclear devices in May 1998.

The Indians will also meet with Pakistan's foreign minister Abdul Sattar, and chief Pakistani diplomat Inamul Haq.

Russia to cut 33000 interior troops

MOSCOW, Jan 13: Russia will cut down its interior troops by 33,000 men as part of a general 600,000-people reduction plan for the armed forces and other troops under a Russian Security Council decision, a senior Russian Interior Ministry official said Friday, reports Xinhua.

"To reduce troops, it is necessary to correspondingly change their tasks, that is, to lift or reduce some of them," Lieutenant General Stanislav Kavun, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Russian interior forces, told reporters here.

Specific units and positions subject to reduction will be defined only after the government works out a mechanism for this, he said.

In any case, the reduction will not affect the troops' combat forces, especially those engaged in establishing order in Chechnya, the general said.

Moreover, discharged servicemen will receive all social protection they are qualified to have under law, he said.

60 Pakistanis freed from bonded labour camp

MULTAN, Pakistan, Jan 13: More than 60 people forced to work as fettered slaves for 13 years have been released from a bonded labour camp in a Pakistani village, officials said today, reports AFP.

They won their freedom after a judicial officer accompanied by police raided the camp, located at Manawala in Khanawal district, 50 kilometres from here, on Friday, they said.

The action was ordered by high court judge Munir Ahmad in response to a petition filed by advocate Rashid Rehman of the private Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, court sources said.

Police said they had arrested the owner of the camp where the bonded labourers, including 44 women and children, were kept in chains and made to work in a brick-making kiln without wages.

Heads of several of the destitute families who arrived here after their release thanked the judge and the rights commission for their freedom.

"We were trapped into forced labour. They offered us loans for working at the kiln and once there we were enslaved," 40-year old Mohammad Riaz told AFP.

"Armed guards kept a vigil as we toiled during day and at night we

were chained in the camp. We received no wages and any demands were met with brutal narrated beatings. We thank God the oppression has come to an end."

The kiln owner faces up to five years in jail under the local laws prohibiting bonded labour, police said.

Though rehabilitation is an uphill task for the freed families Riaz said they had learned the brick-making trade and "we can earn our livelihood in freedom."

70 pc of Americans have confidence in Bush: Poll

WASHINGTON, Jan 13: A week before his inauguration as the 43rd US president, the overwhelming majority of Americans have confidence in George W. Bush's ability to handle the economy and world affairs, a new opinion poll showed Friday, reports AFP.

The survey by CNN television and Time magazine found seventy per cent of those polled said they had a lot of confidence or some confidence in Bush's ability to provide real leadership for the country today.

However, Bush is not the most popular member of his administration.

The approval rating for secretary of state-designate Colin Powell reached 77 per cent, according to the poll.

Bush's approval rating on the eve

of his inauguration is slightly lower than Clinton's was in January 1993, when he was about to take office.

Seventy-seven per cent of survey respondents had confidence in Clinton before he moved into the White House. Ronald Reagan's approval rating before he assumed power in January 1981 was 81 per cent.

The poll has also detected some growth of conservative tendencies in US society.

Only 35 per cent of those surveyed said a woman should be able to get an abortion if she wants one no matter what the reason -- the lowest level of approval since 1987, the surveys said.

300 Serbs died of cancer after depleted uranium attacks

LONDON, Jan 13: Up to 300 Serb refugees whose suburb of Sarajevo was heavily attacked by NATO jets using depleted uranium shells in 1995 have died of cancer, a highly respected war correspondent reported in Britain's Independent newspaper today, reports AFP.

Award-winning reporter Robert Fisk said 5,000 Serbs fled their homes after their Hadjici suburb came under attack in the summer of that year.

All the surviving refugees believe that the cancer and leukaemia that have affected people from the district were the result of US A-10 bombers striking their factories with depleted uranium rounds, he said.

The US authorities maintain that there is no scientific evidence to prove depleted uranium munitions - used by US forces in the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and in the 1994-95 conflict in Bosnia -- cause cancer.

2 Palestinians executed for collaborating with Israel

GAZA CITY, Jan 13: Two Palestinians sentenced to death for collaborating with Israel were executed by firing squad at the same time today morning in Gaza City and in the northern West Bank town of Nablus, a Palestinian police officer said, reports AFP.

Majdy Maqawi, 28, was executed at the police headquarters in Gaza City. He had been convicted by a Palestinian Authority security court for providing Israeli security services with information that allowed them to kill four militants from Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction and another man.

Allam Beni Ouda, 24, was sentenced December 7 by a compara-

ble court in the West Bank for assisting Israeli forces in the car bomb killing of his cousin, a member of the hardline movement Hamas.

The executions were the first ever carried out by the Palestinian Authority for collaboration with Israel.

A mufti recited passages from the Quran to a handcuffed and blindfolded Beni Ouda. Nine masked policemen shot, leaving the coup de grace to an officer who shot the man in the head.

The body was taken away by an ambulance, as the crowd was shouting "death to traitors" and "Allah-akbar".

In Nablus, the execution was carried out by 10 masked policemen in front of a crowd of 5,000.

Maqawi confessed that he had provided information on his nephew, who belonged to Fatah and on three other members of Arafat movement, which enabled the Israeli army to launch an operation that led to their deaths on November 22.

Beni Ouda had admitted in court that he collaborated with Israel, but denied any implication in his cousin Ibrahim Beni Ouda's death in a November 23 car-bomb attack in Nablus.

HK deports Falungong members

HONG KONG, Jan 13: Hong Kong has refused entry to 12 members of China's banned Falungong movement going to an annual meeting being viewed as a challenge to Beijing's local authority, a spokeswoman for the group said today.

Three of the members have already been sent back to their countries, and the rest are being detained at the Chep Lap Kok international airport, spokeswoman Sophie Xiao told AFP.

Of those who were put on return flights, two were from the United States and one was from Australia, she said.

"I think the immigration must have a list of Falungong members given by Beijing," another Falungong spokeswoman, Hui Yeehan, said, noting that some of the detained had arrested in previous demonstrations in China.

Hui said one of the detained followers, an Australian named Zhang Cuiying, would likely be deported later Saturday.

Zhang had been scheduled to

speak at the meeting about her "horrifying experiences she had while under arrest in China last year," she said.

A spokesman for a Hong Kong-based human rights group said that of the members still being detained seven were from Japan, three were from the United States, and two were from Australia.

Frank Lu of the International Centre for Human Rights said the followers should "have encountered no problems" at the airport but that the detentions "may have been a warning to members not to do something bad in Hong Kong."

"The Hong Kong government has let them have this conference, so I think Beijing has influenced this crackdown," Lu said.

He added that many other Falungong followers were detained for several hours before being allowed into the territory over the past several days.

Immigration authorities at the airport would not comment on the cases.



Former Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (C) leaves the Military Hospital in Santiago on Friday. Pinochet underwent a third day of medical exams ordered by Judge Juan Guzman to determine if he is fit to be tried for human rights abuses committed during his 1973-90 regime. --AFP photo

IAEA to inspect Iraqi nuclear material

UNITED NATIONS, Jan 13: The International Atomic Energy Agency said on Friday it intends to carry out a limited inspection of nuclear material in Iraq this month to ensure that the material it knew was there two years ago is all still there, reports Reuters.

The inspection would have the limited goal of simply verifying that the known nuclear material, none of which is of weapons grade, was there and remained under seal, said Mohamed ElBaradei, director-general of the Vienna-based nuclear watchdog agency.

"It would not and could not serve

as a substitute" for more comprehensive and intrusive IAEA inspections in Iraq conducted prior to 1998 under a Security Council resolution ordering Baghdad to eliminate all its weapons of mass destruction, he said in a letter of the 15-nation UN Security Council.

The IAEA is required to carry out these limited inspections once a year, and the last one was completed on Jan. 25, 2000, ElBaradei said in his letter dated Dec. 22 and circulated on Friday.

Judge puts off interrogation of Pinochet

SANTIAGO, Jan 13: A judge postponed his interrogation of Augusto Pinochet Friday, as supporters of Chile's former dictator claimed he was "exhausted" after a third and final day of medical tests set to determine his fitness to stand trial for human rights abuses, reports AFP.

With the decision, Guzman was responding to a request by Pinochet attorneys the judge suspend or postpone his questioning of the ailing general, who completed the medical exams in three days instead of the scheduled four.

Guzman's measure Friday saw him delay his interrogation of Pinochet for a third time, switching the date from next Monday, January 15, to Tuesday, January 23.

Pinochet, 85, was first cited on December 27 to appear for questioning within 30 days over his role on murder and kidnapping charges relating to a series of summary executions in October 1973, the month after the bloody coup that brought him to power. Some 75 political prisoners were assassinated by the "Caravan of Death" squad, led by general Sergio Arellano Stark, according to human rights groups.

A second interrogation date, January 9, was also postponed.

The medical tests on Pinochet, carried out at Santiago's Military Hospital, are aimed at determining his fitness to stand trial for human rights abuses during his 1973-1990 rule.

Mexican judge okays Argentine's extradition to Spain on charges of genocide

MEXICO CITY, Jan 13: In a precedent-setting decision, a Mexican judge Friday gave the green light for the extradition to Spain of a retired Argentine officer on charges of genocide and terrorism during Argentina's 1976-1983 military dictatorship, reports AFP.

"The courts of the Spanish government are legally competent to conduct the trial of Ricardo Miguel Cavallo," said Judge Jesus Luna, reading the conclusions of his 728-page decision at a Mexico City jail where the former officer is held.

If the Mexican government goes ahead with the extradition, it would be the first time a person accused of human rights violations is extradited to a country other than that where he allegedly committed the crimes.

"This ... sets a very important international precedent," said Rocio Culebro, head of Amnesty International in Mexico.

Aides of President Vicente Fox said earlier the government would accept a recommendation by the court to extradite the suspect, as long as it followed Mexican and international laws.

Spanish authorities had issued an international warrant against the ex-navy officer in August, accusing him of torturing and killing opponents of Argentina's 1976-1983 military dictatorship.

Luna recommended to the Mexican government the extradition of Cavallo on charges of genocide and terrorism, but not on charges of torture because those were voided by time limitations.

Argentine authorities had opposed the extradition, arguing "the principle of territoriality" under which a person cannot be tried for a given crime in a country other than the one where he allegedly committed that same crime.

Cavallo is one of about 100 Argentines indicted by Garzon in relation with crimes committed during the former dictatorship.

He was arrested in August as he sought to leave the Mexican resort town of Cancun for Buenos Aires, after the Mexican newspaper Reforma identified him as the former officer at the Argentine Navy's School of Mechanics, a notorious detention camp during the dictatorship.