

International

Lanka-US extradition treaty comes into effect

COLOMBO, Jan 14: An extradition treaty between Sri Lanka and the United States has formally gone into effect, replacing a colonial-era arrangement, the foreign ministry here said today, reports AFP.

The documents relating to the ratification of the treaty were exchanged in Washington on Friday, the ministry said.

The US and Sri Lanka signed the extradition treaty in September 1999, replacing a colonial-era US-British agreement on the exchange of suspected criminals signed in 1931 when this island was known as Ceylon.

The new pact, signed at the State Department by Foreign Minister Kadirgamar and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, closed several loopholes in the original treaty which had become outdated.

Kadirgamar, who first proposed the negotiation of a new treaty in 1997 mostly to deal with terrorist suspects, said he was pleased with the treaty which US Assistant Secretary of State Karl Inderfurth had termed a "landmark."

"It sends a clear signal to all perpetrators that they shall not enjoy a safe haven in our territories," Kadirgamar said, adding that the treaty was testament to both Washington and Colombo's fight against terrorism.

US sailor held in Japan for assaulting women

TOKYO, Jan 14: A US sailor was arrested on the southern Japanese island of Okinawa on Sunday for allegedly assaulting a woman in the second criminal incident in a week in which a US serviceman has been implicated, reports Reuters.

Chief Petty Officer Christopher Sczublewski, 33, was arrested after allegedly hitting a 59-year-old woman in a bar in the early hours on Sunday and injuring her finger, a police spokesman said.

Last Tuesday, US Marine Corporal Raven Gogol, 21, was arrested for allegedly molesting a 16-year-old local girl in Okinawa, which has a heavy concentration of US troops.

Police said Gogol suddenly approached the girl in the dark, lifted up her skirt and took a photograph of her underwear.

That arrest prompted Japan on Friday to recommend that the US military take strict punitive measures to prevent sex crimes by its servicemen, only a week after all curfew restrictions on troops were lifted on the island.

Apartment fire kills five in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 14: Five members of a Malaysian family died when fire broke out in their 15th floor apartment in the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Sentul early today, reports AFP.

Kaleesvaran Ahegasan, 40, helped his eldest daughter Subatra, 18, to escape via a bathroom window. But he, his wife and their three other children aged between 12 and 17 were killed, Bernama news agency reported.

Neighbour Jamalian Jaijani, 36, said she was alerted by shouts of "fire" and screams for help.

"There was thick smoke, I grabbed my three children and went down the stairs from the 15th floor. Several neighbours and members of the public tried to open the door of the apartment which was on fire but failed," she was quoted as saying.

She and her husband took Subatra to hospital, where she is in intensive care.

Peres-Arafat meeting ends without progress

GAZA CITY, Jan 13: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres made no apparent progress in meetings here Saturday day aimed at ending months of violence, but further talks are planned, reports AFP.

Arafat and Peres, now Israel's Regional Cooperation Minister, headed the negotiating teams as Israel and the Palestinians finally returned to the negotiating table, following up the last-minute peace bid by outgoing US President Bill Clinton.

The two sides decided to continue their talks "in the next few days," Arafat's political advisor Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP, without specifying whether Arafat and Peres would attend the next meeting.

Abu Rudeina said the talks had been devoted mainly "to the negotiations on the final status of the Palestinian Territories and the importance of reaching an agreement on all matters."

A spokesman for the Israeli government in Jerusalem agreed that "a further meeting will be held in the next few days," and added that a date would be set Sunday.

The spokesman said the aim of the discussions was to "consolidate the decline in the violence" and to "reach a positive conclusion before the end of the mandate of Bill Clinton" who leaves office on January 20.

However Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abd Rabbo told AFP that "the delegations discussed various issues and the issue of the final status, but we achieved no progress," and that "the Clinton initiative is not a basis for the peace process."

"The delegations will meet again Sunday or Monday," Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told journalists, but he too said that "very big differences remain" between the two parties.

Peres left Gaza City late Saturday after meeting Arafat for two and a half hours, both one-on-one and also with negotiators from either side, a senior Palestinian official told AFP.

The Palestinian side comprised negotiators Ahmad Qorei and Erakat, Abd Rabbo, and the head of preventive security in the Gaza Strip, Mohammad Dahlan.

The Israeli delegation was made up of Foreign Minister

Shlomo Ben Ami, former army chief of staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Gilad Sher, chief of staff to caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Barak, an Israeli official said.

After the departure of the Israeli delegation, Arafat held further talks with his team of negotiators, the official added.

Arafat and Peres, a leading Israeli dove and current regional cooperation minister, shared in the 1993 Nobel Prize for signing the Oslo peace agreement, which paved the way for Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Their meeting had been expected to be mainly devoted to working on the three-week-old Clinton peace proposals, Peres said during an interview with Israel's second private television channel.

He also expressed fears the peace process was entering an even more volatile phase with a US presidential transition and a looming victory by Israel's right-wing camp in February 6 elections for prime minister.

"Vajpayee's unilateral ceasefire against Islamic militants has brought some peace to the valley and has raised hopes of a peaceful settlement between India and Pakistan," said Jan Mohammed Wani, a 47-year-old businessman, in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu-Kashmir state.

The village elections could lead to more bloodshed in Kashmir, said Wani.

Panchayats, or village councils, organise community programmes and help build local infrastructure in India, a country where nearly 70 per cent of its 1 billion people live in hundreds of thousands of villages.

Most people responded to the boycott call by the guerrilla groups, which demand an independent Kashmir or a choice to merge with neighboring Islamic Pakistan.

Authorities say the staggered voting will allow security forces to move to various districts and guard against attacks by the guerrillas. Some areas in the Himalayan territory are snow-bound, where voting will be entrusted with the bodies as these were found.

The voters turnout will be a test for pro-India Farooq Abdullah, the state's top elected official. Less than six per cent voters exercised their franchise when Abdullah's National Conference came to power in the state in 1996. The turnout was less than 12 per cent when voting was held for parliamentary seats in 1999.

For the first time in years, the weekend's official press carried none of the usual cartoons and commentaries slamming Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy.

Military sources told AFP that the regime ordered the "Mirror" daily and the English- and Burmese-language editions of the "New Light of Myanmar" to stop

Relatives search for survivors as quake destroys 330 houses in El Salvador



Volunteers and rescue workers dig through the earth slide that buried some 300 homes in the Las Colinas community near Santa Tecla, 12 km west of San Salvador, on Saturday. The slide was caused by an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale.

small baby were still buried in Las Colinas.

"We have only been able to find bent metal parts of the baby's cradle, but we can't find the child's little body. We are feeling hopeless," added her husband, Erick Lemus.

The search dragged on as the persistent drone of electric generators gave floodlights power at this and at other sites in the country where rescue work continued apace.

Television images from all over the country late Saturday showed collapsed houses, wrecked roads, children wandering through half-destroyed shantytowns, and distraught people praying for help for their family members.

At least 136 people were killed in El Salvador, with some 500 injured according to rescue officials.

Kashmir's first village elections in 23 years

SRINAGAR, Jan 14: Thousands of security personnel were on alert today in freezing conditions to prevent Islamic militants from thwarting India-controlled Kashmir's first village elections in 23 years, reports AP.

On Monday, the first phase of voting will cover Kupwara, Poonch and Rajouri districts close to the cease-fire line dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan. The eight-phase exercise will be completed in March.

A top separatist leader, Mirwaz Omer Farooq, warned that the election was ill-timed and could scuttle the peace process initiated by Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpeeyee.

Farooq's All Parties Hurriyet Conference and Pakistan-based militant groups demanding self-determination for Kashmir have asked voters to boycott the elections, which they say will legitimise New Delhi's control over Kashmir.

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Some heavy machinery was at work, but local people used anything to hand -- sticks and picks -- to pull off the rubble. Hundreds of volunteers, soldiers and members of the police formed human chains to remove earth from the site.

White-coated rescue workers, who attempted to keep a tally of the rising death toll, were entrusted with the bodies as these were found.

Among them was journalist Claudia Rivera, who said that her brother, sister-in-law and their

small baby were still buried in Las Colinas.

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Some of those who had lost relatives were highly critical of the construction company for building homes in a risky location.

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Junta orders media to halt attacks on Suu Kyi

YANGON, Jan 14: Myanmar's junta has ordered state-run media to halt its stream of attacks on opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in a further sign of a thaw between the two sides as they edge towards a landmark dialogue, reports AFP.

For the first time in years, the weekend's official press carried none of the usual cartoons and commentaries slamming Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy.

Military sources told AFP that the regime ordered the "Mirror" daily and the English- and Burmese-language editions of the "New Light of Myanmar" to stop

hurling vicious personal insults at the opposition leader.

The move came at the request of UN special envoy to Myanmar Razali Ismail, who brokered secret talks between Aung San Suu Kyi and junta number three Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt that began late last year.

Razali put the request to Khin Nyunt during a meeting in Yangon earlier this month, the sources said.

Diplomats here have for some time been urging the junta to halt the petty attacks on Aung San Suu Kyi, arguing that they poison the political atmosphere in the military-run country.

The junta may now decide to release jailed NLD party members, especially the sick and infirm, to show it is serious

Reagan undergoes surgery

SANTA MONICA, California, Jan 14: Former US president Ronald Reagan was recovering in hospital Saturday after "successful" surgery to repair a fractured right hip, his doctor said, reports AFP.

The operation on Reagan, who turns 90 next month, was performed early Saturday after he broke his hip the previous evening in a fall at his home in the upscale Los Angeles suburb of Bel Air.

"He's doing well, we're happy," surgeon Kevin Ehrhart told a news conference. He added, however: "It's a serious injury" and his prognosis is "guarded."

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She also said that the level of violence and terror experienced by the country in the recent past had now reached a dangerous level.

She cited the Christmas Eve bombings at churches and clergymen's homes across Indonesia that left 18 people killed. She called the bombings "crimes against humanity that cannot be justified by whatever reasons."

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