

Autonomy only solution to Kashmir problem: CM

SRINAGAR, Jan 15: Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah yesterday said the only solution to the Kashmir problem was granting autonomy to the state and suggested that the Line of Control by converted to an international border, reports PTI.

In my opinion, the only solution to the Kashmir problem is granting autonomy to state. Besides, the LOC should be converted into an international border to allow movement of people on either side, he told a meeting here yesterday.

Abdullah said he has told the centre to allow all Hurriyat Conference leaders to visit Pakistan to see for themselves the plight of the people there.

9 feared dead in Korean ship explosion

SEOUL, Jan 15: Nine South Korean seamen were killed or missing today after an explosion on a Panama-registered cargo ship which sank off the southern port of Pusan, officials said, reports AFP.

The 5,544-tonne P. Harmony exploded and sank near the southern island of Koje on Monday morning, said SK Shipping Co., a South Korean company which chartered the ship to carry oil products.

The ship sank with 16 crew on board," SK spokeswoman Lee Ji-Yong told AFP. "The cause of the explosion is not known immediately."

South Korean maritime police and navy boats and helicopters rushed to rescue seven people and recover three bodies, YTN, a cable news network, said.

Six other crew are still missing, it said, adding navy boats were struggling to stop the spread of oil leaking from the vessel.

"We expect limited sea contamination as the ship was carrying 208 tonnes of fuel. Its cargo was already unloaded," Lee said.

P. Harmony, was en route for the southern industrial complex of Yosu.

Police try to open bunker at Suharto son's home

JAKARTA, Jan 15: Indonesian police, equipped with drills, jack hammers and a generator, arrived at the Jakarta home of the fugitive son of former president Suharto today to try to open an alleged underground bunker, reports AFP.

Police suspect billionaire businessman "Tommy" Hutomo Mandala Putra, 38, might be hiding in the underground system.

But, Suharto's family lawyer, Juan Felix Tampubolon, told reporters forensics police were Monday awaiting the arrival of another piece of equipment before beginning efforts to open the bunker.

On Saturday police tried to enter the bunker but failed, saying they did not have necessary equipment to open a hydraulic door.

Police said last week an underground bunker had been detected after forensics officers armed with georadar detectors scanned the grounds of the adjoining homes of the elder Suharto and his children.

There have been persistent reports of interconnecting bunkers below the adjoining residences of the former first family.

Tommy has been on the run since early November, when President Abdurrahman Wahid rejected his appeal for a pardon from a corruption conviction, for which he was to serve an 18-month prison term.

Portuguese President reelected

LISBON, Jan 15: Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio begins a second, and final, five-year term today after securing an overwhelming election victory, tempered by a very low turnout, reports AFP.

Only half of the Portuguese electorate bothered to turn out for Sunday's poll, but those who did gave the 61-year-old Socialist leader -- who had been widely expected to win -- 55.76 per cent of the popular vote, enough to avoid a second round run-off.

Coming in a distant second was his right-wing rival Joaquim Ferreira do Amaral who garnered just 34.54 percent of the vote.

"Just like five years ago I have the pleasure of standing in front of you," Sampaio told hundreds of celebrating supporters in central Lisbon.

"Now our flag is a national flag. We shall work for Portugal's future," added the president, who appeared on a balcony at the town hall with his wife and two children to thank his supporters.

Conceding defeat, Ferreira do Amaral congratulated Sampaio, but stressed Portugal's democracy was under threat because of the low turnout.

Indian, Pak experts call for N-risk reduction

ISLAMABAD, Jan 15: India and Pakistan must do more to reduce the risk of nuclear war, experts from both sides said here today at a seminar seen as a chance to boost unofficial contacts between the South Asian rivals, reports AFP.

Retired Indian air chief marshal, S.K. Mehra, said the visit by the Indian delegation of former diplomats and defence experts was a backdoor way to find "common ground" between the world's newest nuclear powers.

"Any discussion with each other has an advantage. We are not decision makers but we are trying to see the common ground," he told AFP on the sidelines of the seminar on nuclear risk and restraint.

"Avoidance of conflict between the two sides is in the interest of the two countries. We need dialogue to get going."

The Indian delegation includes former foreign secretary J.N. Dixit, former diplomat K.S. Bajpai, retired lieutenant

general Vasantha R. Raghavan, retired rear-admiral Raja Menon and a university professor, Mateen Zuberi.

They are expected to meet Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar and Foreign Secretary Inamul Haq during their stay.

The seminar, organised by local think-tank Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI), will receive papers from defence experts on the nuclear risks perceived by India and Pakistan.

Former Pakistani diplomat Najumuddin Sjeikh said "Track II" diplomacy through unofficial, low-level contacts "is a useful way of seeking a meeting of minds on the subject of considerable importance to security in South Asia."

Pakistan and India have fought three wars since their partition and independence from Britain in 1947, as well as a bloody border conflict in the disputed Kashmir region in 1998.

US President Bill Clinton has

described South Asia as the "most dangerous place in the world" following their entry into the nuclear club in 1998.

India led the way with tests which were answered almost immediately by Pakistan.

Both sides have refused to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, saying they need a "minimum deterrence" given the ongoing dispute over Kashmir.

Tentative moves are currently underway to resume dialogue between Pakistan and India over Kashmir. Talks have been on ice since 1998, after border hostilities broke out in the Kargil area of the state.

Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf on Monday urged a resumption of dialogue between Pakistan and India during a meeting with the Indian ambassador, officials said.

An official statement said Musharraf "stressed the need for early resumption of the dialogue process for resolution of the Kashmir dispute."

Two killed in police firing in Nepal jail

KATHMANDU, Jan 15: Two inmates were killed and more than a dozen injured, some seriously, when police fired on them in Banke district jail in southwestern Nepal, the official RSS news agency said today, reports AFP.

Police opened fire Sunday when the inmates staged a protest on the terrace of the jail building and pelting bricks, RSS said quoting jail authorities.

The inmates were demanding better facilities, including more food, blankets and mattresses, better sanitation and water supply, sports goods and newspapers.

Shyam Prasad Mainali, the chief district officer, was quoted as saying police were forced to open fire to control the situation as the inmates were pelting bricks.

"It was impossible to bring the situation under control without opening fire," he said.

"I will try my best to meet their demands and will start a dialogue with the inmates soon," he added.



Survivors surround relief workers on Sunday in Comasagua, El Salvador, a day after a devastating earthquake rocked Central America. Authorities say at least 349 have died, more than 500 injured, some 1,200 are missing and thousands of houses have been destroyed. -- AFP photo

Village elections begin in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 15: The restive Indian state of Kashmir held its first village polls for 23 years today, despite threats of violence from Muslim militant groups, reports AFP.

Residents in three Kashmiri districts -- Kupwara, Rajouri and Poonch -- trickled to voting booths in the first stage of state-wide polling that will take a month to complete.

Altogether, 1,667 candidates in the three districts were standing for posts in 125 village councils, or "panchayats."

"Elaborate arrangements for the polling, including security for the peaceful conduct of the polls have been made," an official spokesman said in the Kashmir summer capital, Srinagar.

The voters had to face freezing temperatures as well as calls from militant groups opposed to Indian rule for a boycott of the elections.

Kashmir's dominant militant

group, the Hizbul-Mujahideen, said the polls were a "conspiracy" to undermine the Kashmir separatist movement.

"Taking part in any polls under the Indian dispensation is bound to cause harm to the on-going movement," a Hizbul statement said.

The polls are being held just a day after Hizbul militants fired two grenades at Indian Kashmir's Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah.

Muslim militants, including the Hizbul, have rejected a continuing unilateral ceasefire by Indian troops in Kashmir.

New Delhi accuses Islamabad of fomenting insurgency in the Indian-administered zone of Kashmir.

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

Lone survivor of quake rescued

SANTA TECLA, Salvador, Jan 15: A ray of hope emerged amid the El Salvador's fields of devastation Sunday, as emergency crews rescued a lone survivor who had spent about 30 hours trapped under the rubble of his home, reports AFP.

Sergio Armando Moreno, 22, was evidently in shock as rescuers carried him to hospital after removing tonnes of earth and huge slabs of concrete that had threatened to collapse over him.

The rescue helped boost spirits, after rescuers had excavated one body after another amid fears the death toll could eventually reach the thousands.

A killer earthquake that shook Central America on Saturday triggered a massive landslide that buried an entire neighbourhood of the small town of Santa Tecla, just outside the capital.

When he emerged from the

tiny hole in which he was trapped, Moreno was too stunned to speak. But earlier, he had talked to relatives and rescuers, who put him on an intravenous drip and gave him oxygen.

"This is incredibly moving," said Salvadoran firefighter Salvador Lisandro Alvarenga, who worked alongside Mexican and Guatemalan teams in the dramatic rescue.

Guatemalan firefighters dug a passage to Moreno after a relative told them exactly where he had been when the mountainside came crashing down.

As the firefighters realised the roof of a neighbouring house had crashed on top of Moreno's fragile enclosure, the Mexican armed forces deployed heavy machinery to remove huge slabs of concrete.

Rescuers told Moreno's relatives that although they hoped to save his legs, they feared they

might have to amputate them.

Relatives said the young man, who had lived for the past four years in Maryland in the United States, had only returned to El Salvador on January 6 and had been busy painting his house when the quake struck.

Even as medics comforted him, rescue workers kept digging out mangled bodies from the well-heeled neighbourhood of Las Colinas, which he had called home for just a few days.

Officials had little hope of finding further survivors, and expected the death toll to rise drastically from the 349 bodies counted on Sunday, many of them in Santa Tecla, where about 1,000 people were missing and believed trapped under the wreckage.

China builds new missile base

TAIPEI, Jan 15: China is building a base in a southeastern city for advanced ground-to-air missiles, a move feared to weaken Taiwan's air defence capabilities, it was reported here today, reports AFP.

The base, built in Zhangzhou of Fujian province, would be used for deployment of Russian-made S-300 MPU missiles, the United Daily News quoted intelligence information as saying.

The S-300 MPU had been mobilised from areas surrounding Beijing to Zhangzhou and Fuzhou, also in Fujian, during

major military manoeuvres in 1995-96.

Modified versions of the S-300 would have ranges between 150 km and 200 km, the paper said, but added it was not clear whether China possessed such advanced weapons.

From the Zhangzhou base, the S-300 MPUs were capable of attacking aircraft above Taiwan's Penghu island group and from Fuzhou, they could reach Taiwan's western Hsinchu coast, the paper said.

The new base might also be a future main deployment centre

for FT-2000 missiles being developed by China, according to the paper.

The FT-2000 would be capable of hitting Taiwan's early warning AWAC (Airborne Warning and Control) systems and ground radar stations, the paper said.

Several hundred ground-to-ground missiles have already been deployed along the mainland southeastern coast facing Taiwan.

Cambodian senate okays law to try Khmer Rouge leaders

PHNOM PENH, Jan 15: Cambodia today took another step towards a long-awaited trial of former leaders of the murderous Khmer Rouge regime, winning plaudits from 10 US congressmen who arrived here for talks, reports AFP.

Cambodia's senate unanimously approved a draft law for a UN-backed genocide tribunal, which was passed last week by the national assembly and now simply needs ratification by the Constitutional Council and King Norodom Sihanouk.

The head of the congressional delegation, House of Representatives minority leader Richard Gephardt, said the congressmen were pleased the Khmer Rouge tribunal will go forward.

"It may take some time but I'm pleased with what has been accomplished and we will convey that to the leaders today," Gephardt told reporters on arrival.

The law approved by the senate Monday provides for the involvement of foreign and local judges and prosecutors in trying surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge, accused of killing up to 1.7 million people between 1975 and 1979.

The deaths came from executions, starvation and overwork as the ultra-Maoists led by Pol Pot emptied the cities, banned money and brutally crushed dissent in a bizarre attempt to create an agrarian utopia.

After being driven from power

by an invading Vietnamese army in 1979, the Khmer Rouge launched a jungle rebellion which lasted until 1998 when it fizzled out with the death of former dictator Pol Pot and the mass defection of rebel troops.

No date has been set for the trials and it is uncertain how many Khmer Rouge leaders will be put in the dock.

Only two are in custody -- former military supremo Ta Mok, dubbed "The Butcher" and former security chief and prison warden Kang Kek Ieu, known as "Duch" -- while several others live in frontier towns in former Khmer Rouge strongholds.

'HK may clamp down on Falungong'

HONG KONG, Jan 15: Hong Kong authorities could clamp down on the Falungong spiritual movement under pressure from Beijing, a spokesman for the group said today, reports AFP.

"There are worrying signs the government will restrict the activities of Falungong here in the future because of strong pressure from Beijing," said Kan Hung-cheung.

He was one of the organisers of the sect's international conference held here at the weekend and attended by more than 1,000 practitioners from 20 countries and regions.

Kan pointed to the detentions of sect members here as an example that the Hong Kong authorities may be moving in on the group outlawed as an "evil cult" by mainland Chinese authorities in July 1999.

Falungong remains legal in Hong Kong, but some 13 practitioners were barred from entering the territory to attend the weekend's marches and conferences. Four launched a hunger strike here late Saturday to protest the ban, while the other nine were deported earlier.

Immigration officials said the 13 had been refused entry due to "irregularities" in their travel documents.

But Kan said: "The Hong Kong government may sacrifice the rule of law and human rights amid pressure from Beijing."

Meanwhile, an immigration spokesman told AFP that a hunger strike launched late Saturday by four members barred entry was over.

Kan said one of the four Falungong members on hunger strike was deported late Sunday, and left Hong Kong with her husband and son who had been allowed to attend the conference.

Stephen Hawking forecasts improved humans in next millennium

BOMBAY, Jan 15: World-renowned physicist Stephen Hawking predicted Sunday that the human race would colonise other planets in 100 years and design an improved human race by the next millennium, reports AP.

"Someone will design improved humans somewhere," he told a 3,000-strong audience at a public lecture on "Science in the future" in Bombay.

"I am not advocating human genetic engineering as a good thing, I'm just saying it is likely to happen in the next million years whether we like it or not," he said.

Hawking, who holds a prestigious Cambridge University chair once held by Sir Isaac Newton, also forecast that babies would be grown outside the womb in the next hundred years.

The British physicist said humans should improve their mental and physical capabilities and meet challenges posed by space travel.

"If we don't destroy ourselves in the next 100 years, I expect we will spread out to planets in the

nearby solar system and then to nearby stars," Hawking said.

The author of the best-selling "A Brief History of Time" is in Bombay to attend "Strings 2001," a conference on the string theory, also called the "Theory of Everything."

He and others believe that once proved, it may be the answer to conflicting theories on the origin and fate of the universe.

Hawking said life on other solar systems would be either more primitive or more advanced than on Earth.

"If life is already developing in other solar systems, there is little chance of a catching it at the stage at which humans are now," Hawking said. "As we explore galaxies, we might find primitive life but not beings like us."

Hawking said the development of improved human beings on Earth would cause problems and advocated acceptance and understanding. He said although many people advocated a ban on genetic engineering, it would be allowed on plants and animals for economic reasons.

Tibetan youth injured in Delhi police firing

NEW DELHI, Jan 15: A Tibetan youth was wounded when police opened fire late on Sunday on several dozen protesters who tried to invade the hotel where Chinese parliament chief Li Peng was staying, a police officer said, reports Reuters.

Eight others were arrested in the incident, the police officer, who did not want his name used, said on Monday.

He gave no details about the youth's condition but media reports said a police bullet hit a Tibetan youth in the arm.

One Tibetan was injured and eight arrested when they tried to enter the hotel," the official told Reuters.

The incident did not disturb the visit of Li, the second highest-ranking Chinese leader to arrive in Delhi since India held a series of nuclear tests in 1998.

Li's visit has been dogged by protests by Tibetan exiles demanding that Beijing begin unconditional talks with the Dalai Lama over the future of their homeland.



Some 4,000 anti-Estrada protesters march to the Senate in Manila yesterday. The protesters declared the impeached Philippine President Joseph Estrada, popularly know by his nickname Erap, guilty and called for his resignation. The Senate impeachment tribunal is expected to hand down the verdict on the former movie star on February 12. -- AFP photo

Clinton: A tireless crusader for ME peace

WASHINGTON, Jan 15: Throughout his eight years in the White House, Bill Clinton has been the main architect of the historic rapprochement between Israel and the Palestinians, but he has failed to seal their reconciliation with a final peace deal, reports AFP.

Ending the 52-year-old conflict with a peace pact became an obsession for the US leader, who frequently intervened personally in the complex negotiation process.

"God, it's hard. It's like nothing I ever dealt with," he said last July as he huddled with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat during the Camp David summit in Maryland. "It's the hardest thing that I have ever seen."

Since he began tackling the explosive issue in 1993, a few months after he took office, Clinton has spent many sleepless nights trying to bridge the gaps between Israelis and Palestinians.

Despite his initial lack of foreign policy experience, he deftly

manoeuvred to get involved in the peace process at a time when Israeli and Palestinians, leaving even the CIA in the dark, were holding secret negotiations in Oslo in 1992.

In September 1993 at the White House, he secured an unprecedented accord between the two Middle East enemies: a declaration of principles granting autonomy to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, coupled with a historic handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Arafat.

Two years later, Rabin paid this gesture with his life, as he was gunned down by a Jewish extremist in Tel Aviv. Clinton traveled to Jerusalem to mourn the death of his friend.

With Rabin's death, the gaps between the parties seemed to widen. But Clinton, who cemented his "peacemaker" image in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, would not give up.

The US leader encouraged multilateral negotiations between Israel and 13 Arab



states on such issues as water, refugees and arms control.

But despite his efforts, the peace process became increasingly bogged down. A wave of bomb attacks between February and March 1996 by Palestinian extremists in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv fostered a climate that led to the election of right-winger

Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's prime minister.

In September 1996, two months before his re-election, Clinton managed to defuse a crisis caused by the opening of a tunnel in the Arab section of Jerusalem as part of Israeli archaeological excavations.

But when Netanyahu launched construction of a Jewish settlement near Jerusalem and announced that Israel would turn over only 2.7 percent of the West Bank to Palestinian control, hopes for peace seemed to vanish.

And Clinton made no secret of his exasperation with Netanyahu. "There is a limit to the degree in which we participate in a process that doesn't have utility," the White House said.

Weakened by a Republican-controlled Congress and by the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Clinton turns his attention away from the Israeli-Palestinian talks, at an impasse since March 1997. But in October 1998, he managed to broker the Wye

Plantation interim accord.

Clinton returned to Israel in December 1998 and became the first US president to tour the Gaza Strip.

Despite hopes raised by Barak's election in 1999 and the resumption of negotiations leading to the Camp David summit, Clinton will leave office on January 20 having failed to broker a final peace between the two sides.

Mary Jane Deeb, a Middle East expert in Washington, said the main reason was that Clinton could not really persuade the Arab side that he was a "honest broker."

Indeed Clinton has made no secret of his strong ties to Israel.

In an emotion-laden address to the Israeli Knesset (parliament) on October 27 1994 during the first of his three trips to the Jewish state, he said: "Your journey is our journey, and America will stand with you, now and always."

UN staff among nine killed in Mongolia chopper crash

ULAN BATOR, Jan 15: Nine people, including United Nations staff, were killed when a helicopter carrying Mongolians and foreigners crashed about 1,000 kilometres west of the Mongolian capital Ulan Bator on Sunday, reports AFP.

Five foreigners and four Mongolians, among them a member of parliament, were killed, while 14 others were injured, 10 of them seriously, government and UN officials told AFP.

The crash happened around noon in Malchin district, part of the mountainous province of Uvs in western Mongolia, while the helicopter was carrying 24 passengers, including members of the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team inspecting relief needs in the wake of this winter's harsh weather.

The Mi-8 helicopter, chartered by the UN from Mongolia's state airline MIAT, dropped from a cruising height of 50 metres and exploded on impact, bursting into flames, according to Col. Datchuluun, an official with the

state emergency office.

Officials in Ulan Bator said it was not yet clear what had caused the helicopter to crash.

The Mongolian government and the UN late Sunday issued a joint press release confirming the crash had taken place, and saying it had claimed a "tragic loss of human lives," but offered few details.

"This tragic news is released by the government of Mongolia and the United Nations with deep sorrow," the brief press release said.

The five foreigners killed in the accident included a US national working for the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), as well as a German and a British UN official, according to the Mongolian foreign ministry.

Two staff members of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corp.) were also among those killed in the crash, a foreign ministry official said.