

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 be 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 Kojie 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 Jiny 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 crews 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 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.

They 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 give 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 Joaquin 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 after 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 Zubari.

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 Steikh 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 news-papers.

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



Chairman of China's National People's Congress Li Peng (L) and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) smile as they shake hands prior to talks at Vajpayee's residence in New Delhi yesterday. Li is on a nine-day official visit to India, in a bid to cement Indo-Sino relations which fell to a low in 1998 after India exploded nuclear devices.

- 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 statewide 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 Kashmiri 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

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.

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 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.

'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.

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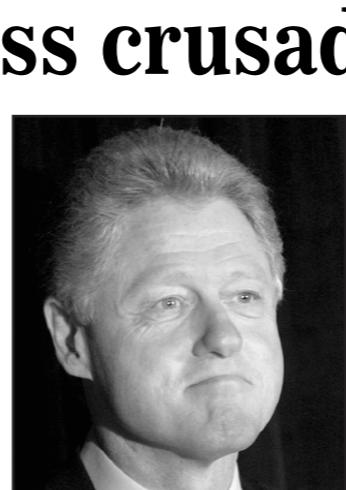
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Clinton: A tireless crusader for ME peace



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 1996 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 Deep, 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 his 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."

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

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 of 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 (