

## No talks with Pakistan until 'terrorism' ends: Kashmir CM

JAMMU, India, Jan 16 : The Chief Minister of Indian-administered Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah, today ruled out any bilateral talks between India and Pakistan until Islamabad "stopped exporting terrorism," reports AFP.

Speaking to reporters, Abdullah said that while an ongoing ceasefire in Kashmir had eased tensions on the disputed border with Pakistan, Muslim militants had "escalated" their killings of civilians.

"Unless they stop killing and other acts of violence and desist from throwing grenades at public places, there cannot be any question of holding bilateral talks," he said.

Abdullah's comments came just a day after India's High Commissioner to Pakistan, V.K. Nambiar, met Pakistan's military ruler Pervez Musharraf in Islamabad.

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

India last month extended its unilateral suspension of operations against Muslim separatists in Kashmir till January 26.

New Delhi is also considering requests by a team of Kashmiri separatist political leaders to visit Islamabad for talks with Pakistani leaders and Muslim militant groups.

According to strategic analysts here, the meeting between Musharraf and Nambiar was significant in moving along the nascent peace process over Kashmir.

"We are not in 'the talks about talks' stage," we have proceeded to the next stage," said C. Raja Mohan, a strategic analyst.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, while announcing the extension of the ceasefire on December 20, had said that New Delhi would be taking "exploratory steps" to restart talks with Pakistan.

"The meeting between Musharraf and Nambiar marks the first of the exploratory steps," Raja Mohan said.

According to Mohan, India has moved from its former demand that Pakistan cease all terrorist actions before talks can resume, to asking for "sufficient proof of preparedness" on the part of Pakistan to create an atmosphere for talks.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) greets his Mauritian counterpart Anerood Jugnauth (L) during a reception at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi yesterday. Jugnauth is in India for a five-day official visit. —AFP photo

## Blizzard traps millions of people, livestock in northern China

BEIJING, Jan 16 : Rescue workers are blocked from reaching areas in northern China where heavy snow has trapped 1.35 million people and three million livestock after a severe blizzard, residents and media said today, reports AFP.

The Sina.com website said the New Year's Eve snowstorm in Inner Mongolia, which lasted more than 70 hours and left snow two meters high in some places, killed at least 27 people, with 14 others missing and feared buried in snow.

The official Xinhua news agency reported last week the harsh and unusual weather also killed more than 80,000 head of livestock. Direct economic losses are estimated at 910 million yuan (110 million dollars).

Much of the accumulated grass for the animals has been destroyed and rescue workers have been

prevented by blocked roads from delivering emergency food, blankets, fuel and animal feed to the disaster area, residents said.

"It's very serious. It's still snowing and every day the wind is strong," said Gao Shupeng, Communist Party secretary of the Ulagai development district, one of the most severely affected.

"In some places, the snow is still two meters high."

Snow-shoveling machines and tractors will need time to open up the roads. Sina.com said it took three hours for one group of visitors to travel seven km.

A higher death toll was prevented because the storm came from the northwest, while many gers -- Mongolian tents -- are built with the door facing south.

The people who died were mostly

caught outdoors herding sheep when the blizzard hit. The snowstorm was mixed with a sandstorm which kicked up winds of up to 50 km per hour, blinding the herders and causing them to lose their sense of direction, Gao said.

Some survivors were frozen, paralysed from their legs down, said a woman in another district.

Many of the animals were killed when their shelters buckled under the heavy snow and when the brutal temperatures froze them to death standing up, Gao said.

"The herders made preparations, but the preparations were not enough to handle such unusual circumstances," Gao said.

Li Zhisheng, a resident of the Dongwuqi district, said some families lost 500 head of cattle from a total herd of 2,000 to 3,000.

## Kuwait's top court rejects vote for women

KUWAIT CITY, Jan 16 : Kuwait's top court today rejected a bid to grant women the vote but activists vowed to battle on for equal political rights as backed by the ruling emir, reports AFP.

The appeal, after an 18-month campaign, was brought to the constitutional court by a Kuwaiti man.

The judges did not give an immediate explanation for rejecting the latest test case, a ruling which came on the eve of the 10th anniversary of the Gulf War in which a US-led coalition liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation.

## Israeli election campaign kicks off

JERUSALEM, Jan 16 : The campaign for the February 6 elections for Israeli prime minister officially kicked off today, pitting incumbent Ehud Barak against right-wing Likud opposition leader Ariel Sharon, reports AFP.

Barak's Labour party took two radio spots and Likud one. More broadcasts were expected later on the two television channels.

Each candidate has the right to 120 minutes of air time. The radio said that Barak, who is trailing badly in the opinion polls, was aiming 65 minutes at the key Russian-speaking electorate, compared with 54 minutes for Sharon.

## 'UN return to W Timor still not possible'

JAKARTA, Jan 16 : The continued presence of armed pro-Jakarta militias in West Timor made it unsafe for UN aid workers to return there, a visiting senior UN official said today, reports AFP.

"It is very important that the security situation in West Timor can be guaranteed (so that) the UN workers can return," said Harri Holkeri, the chairman of the UN General Assembly said.

"But at the moment it is not possible because of the presence of militia forces," he told journalists after meeting President Abdurrahman Wahid.

## Myanmar junta ready to 'join hands' with all forces

BANGKOK Jan 16 : Myanmar's military regime said Tuesday it was ready to "join hands with all the forces in the nation" in an apparent reaction to the announcement of landmark contacts with Aung San Suu Kyi, reports AFP.

But the junta's first secretary Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt said the international community must roll back sanctions if it wants to see "the emergence of a peaceful, modern and democratic state."

The United Nations announced last week that secret talks between

Khin Nyunt and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi were being held to prepare the way for an historic dialogue between the warring sides.

The regime has so far made no official response to the news, but Khin Nyunt's comments during an opening ceremony for a government training course for the first time link the political thaw with the end of sanctions.

## Race against time to rescue survivor: Quake toll tops 600

SAN SALVADOR, Jan 16 : Thousands of Salvadorans slept in tents for a third night, as rescuers frantically looked for survivors in a neighbourhood that was buried during a massive earthquake that took more than 600 lives and left hundreds missing, reports AFP. "We're missing four (bodies)," Katy de Velasquez told reporters as she searched in a local cemetery for eight relatives who were inside two houses when a landslide Saturday buried hundreds of homes in Santa Tecla's Las Colinas neighbourhood, near here.

On Monday, Velasquez said, they found one of her loved ones: "the body of my little granddaughter ... Here she is in this little box."

Other grieving relatives at the

cemetery outside the small town watched in horror as soldiers unceremoniously buried five black trash bags, filled with what a forensic doctor called "human fragments."

Authorities throughout El Salvador on Tuesday continued burying bodies in mass graves as the death toll from Saturday's earthquake rose nationwide to 609 dead and 2,375 injured, with hundreds more still missing and feared dead.

In the Santa Tecla area alone, at least 420 people lost their lives in the quake. Of them, 229 were killed by a quake-triggered landslide in Las Colinas.



Indian cinema's most mischievous actor Govinda (C) dancing at a launching programme of a television game show 'Jeeto Chappar Phaad Ke' on Monday in south Bombay. The Sony TV game show will go on air on January 26. —AFP photo

## Taiwan PM sailing into political storm over N-plant

TAIPEI, Jan 16 : Premier Chang Chun-hsiung is sailing into a political storm if he ignores a rebuke from Taiwan's highest legal body and insists on scrapping a nuclear power plant, analysts and politicians warned today, reports AFP.

They warned that forcing through the cancellation of the 5.6 billion US dollar project -- which is one-third complete -- would worsen the political turmoil which has plagued the island since President Chen Shui-bian took office in May.

"The cabinet should drop its

unconstitutional decision and resume construction of the nuclear facilities following the ruling of the Grand Justices," said Parliament Speaker Wang Jin-pyng, who is a member of the opposition Kuomintang (KMT).

Other opposition politicians threatened to adopt a motion of no-confidence in the premier or force him to resign if he fails to heed the words of the 15 Grand Justices -- the island's highest legal body.

## Kim begins his secret visit to China

SHANGHAI, Jan 16 : North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il was visiting the eastern Chinese city of Shanghai today, a Chinese official in the city told AFP.

The official from the city's foreign affairs bureau refused to give any other details about the North Korean leader's visit.

South Korean media reports said the North Korean leader began his second secret visit to China within a year on Monday.

The Yonhap News agency said Kim planned to visit Shanghai's financial district Pudong before heading to the southern boom town of Shenzhen near Hong Kong as part of a six-day visit.

The North Korean leader visited

China between May 29 and 31 last year, just before his historic mid-June summit with South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung, but the visit took place in the utmost secrecy and China refused to confirm his presence until after his departure.

Earlier report says North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il's personal train crossed the border into China early on Monday, an official at the border post of Dandong told AFP on Tuesday.

"Yesterday morning at 6:00 a.m. (4:00 BST Sunday) his train went through Dandong," said a Chinese border security official, declining to give further details.

## Wahid backs Aceh truce

JAKARTA, Jan 16 : Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid on Tuesday voiced his full support to the new truce with rebel forces in the province of Aceh, saying he was trying to give peace talks a chance to get off the ground, reports AFP.

"His (Wahid's) response (on the provisional agreement) is to fully support the content and the follow up of the Geneva meeting," said presidential spokesman Wimar Witoelar.

Witoelar was referring to a provisional agreement reached in three days of talks in Geneva last week between the the exiled leadership of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and Jakarta, the full contents of which have yet to be made public.

A joint communique issued in Geneva last Wednesday said the two parties had "developed a detailed agenda," would observe a moratorium on violence for one month

starting January 15, and would meet again in February to further their search for a political solution.

"So, he (Wahid) agreed on a condition where negotiations could take place," Witoelar told journalists after the president's meeting with Hasan Wirayuda, Jakarta's envoy to the talks.

## Assam offers truce to ULFA

GUWAHATI, India, Jan 16 : The Chief Minister of India's rebel-torn northeastern state of Assam said today that the current ceasefire in Kashmir could be expanded to Assam if separatist militants came forward for talks, reports AFP.

"In the case of Kashmir, the government announced the ceasefire after some informal discussions took place between the militant leaders and the authorities," said Prafulla Kumar Mahanta.

"In our case, if the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) come forward for negotiations the question of offering a ceasefire can

be decided at an appropriate time," the chief minister told AFP in an interview.

The ULFA is the most powerful of the rebel groups operating in Assam, where it has been fighting for an independent homeland since 1979.

"We don't have any problems even if talks are held directly with the central government. We would welcome anything that leads to a solution," Mahanta said.

Assam is currently witnessing a string of violent attacks, with rebel groups gunning down non-Assamese traders and surrendered militants, and unidentified gun-

men targeting family members of top ULFA leaders.

"We cannot allow this kind of violence to continue and we are committed to fighting it out," Mahanta said.

More than 10,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in Assam during the past two decades.

ULFA chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa said Monday he was prepared to hold talks if the government in New Delhi agreed to discuss the issue of Assamese sovereignty.

## Indian envoy meets Musharraf

ISLAMABAD, Jan 16 : Indian High Commissioner Vijay K. Nambiar's first contact with Pakistani ruler General Pervez Musharraf was a "routine meeting at exceptional times," a source involved in their discussions said today, reports AFP.

The senior source who refused to be named said Monday's talks were the first between Musharraf and Nambiar since the envoy took his post here in August last year.

They come amid renewed efforts from both sides to settle the nuclear neighbours' festering dispute over Kashmir, but the official source said the talks were basically a "reiteration of our positions."

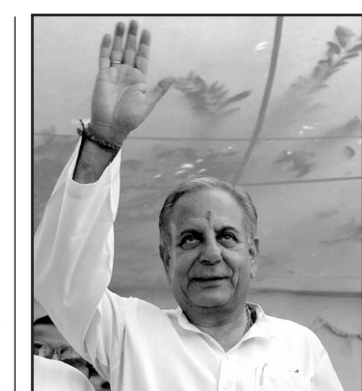
He said Nambiar raised India's

long-standing concerns about cross-border "terrorism," particularly the recent Muslim militant attack on New Delhi's Red Fort, while Musharraf said the violence could only end with dialogue.

"On the reining in of the militant groups the general did not comment," the source said.

Musharraf however expressed "regret" at recent separatist rebel threats to bomb Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's office.

"He said that once the dialogue begins then the violence could be reduced. Musharraf expressed confidence that there could be a creative approach to the solving of the problems," the source said, been invited to visit India.



Jitendra Prasad

## Sonia Gandhi's challenger dies

NEW DELHI, Jan 16 : Jitendra Prasad, a leader of India's main opposition Congress Party who unsuccessfully challenged Sonia Gandhi for the party presidency, died today in a New Delhi hospital, reports AFP.

Prasada who was in a coma when he was admitted to hospital last week died early this morning," said Indu Rana, spokeswoman for New Delhi's Apollo Hospitals.

Prasada was admitted to the Apollo last Tuesday after a massive brain haemorrhage.

The 62-year-old Congress leader had challenged Gandhi for the party presidency in November, campaigning on a platform of greater inner party democracy.

## Congo fever claims 11

ISLAMABAD, Jan 16 (AFP) - Eleven people died of Congo disease, an acute haemorrhagic fever syndrome, in western Pakistan in September and October, according to official reports today, says AFP.

The outbreak followed deaths in western Afghanistan earlier last year which raised alarm bells among foreign relief groups that the highly contagious and gruesome syndrome could spread further.

Victims of Crimean Congo Haemorrhagic Fever (CCHF) usually die within two weeks of infection, with symptoms including headaches, fevers and vomiting.

In its advanced stages massive internal haemorrhaging occurs, with patients vomiting and defecating blood, bleeding into the skin and from the nose, urinary tract and gums.