

International

Kabul tense as fresh UN sanctions take effect

KABUL, Jan 19 : Afghanistan's war-weary capital was quiet but tense today as a UN deadline for the ruling Taliban militia to hand over indicted terrorist Osama bin Laden expired and new sanctions took effect, reports AFP.

UN officials in neighbouring Pakistan said the deadline expired at 11:01 BST, or just after midnight in New York, but the Islamic militia has shown nothing but open defiance and steadfast resignation.

Militia leaders were unavailable for comment Friday, a weekly holiday here, but have offered guarantees that UN staff and foreign aid workers would be spared the violent protests that greeted the first sanctions in 1999.

Taliban Supreme Leader Mulla Mohammad Omar has called on Afghans to "refrain from holding demonstrations against cruel enemies of humanity" while staying united "in the face of machinations of enemies of our faith."

Nevertheless, the UN has halted its foreign staff here and closed its offices Thursday as a "precautionary" measure.

UN officials said the offices would reopen Sunday depending on the security situation, which could change after Friday prayers in Kabul's main mosques, where mullahs are expected to denounce the UN and the West.

"I haven't heard of anything positive or negative, which is probably a good sign," one senior UN staffer told AFP.

A US court has indicted bin Laden to stand trial for allegedly masterminding twin US embassy bombings in East Africa in 1998, but the Taliban insist the Saudi millionaire is a "guest" in Afghanistan and there is no evidence against him.

The trial of four of his alleged associates, who have pleaded not guilty, has already begun in New York. Of 18 others who have been charged, one has pleaded guilty, three are in Britain awaiting extradition and 14 are at large.

Taliban Shariat Radio on

Friday reported: "Afghanistan has no treaty with any country including the US to extradite people they don't like."

"Our traditions do not allow us to expel the one who has fought a holy war against Russians and communists."

It also warned that the "isolation of ancient Afghanistan will entail dangers for the region and the world."

The UN Security Council resolution adopted last month calls for an arms embargo on the Taliban, the closure of its overseas offices, a ban on foreign trips by Taliban chiefs and the freezing of bin Laden's assets.

It also blocks exports to Afghanistan of the chemical used to convert opium into heroin.

UN figures released Thursday showed Afghanistan remained the world's largest producer of opium last year, although production had fallen some 29 percent to 3,276 tonnes due mainly to severe drought.

The UN Drug Control Programme said an "alarming" increase in the number of poppy

growing villages had been recorded despite Taliban efforts to stamp out the lucrative crop.

Taliban officials have also tried to capitalise on criticism from foreign aid workers and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan that the Security Council's decision would not "facilitate humanitarian work."

They have called the curbs "inhumane" and warned food and medical supplies would be blocked at a time of widespread drought and continuing civil war which have driven some 500,000 people from their homes.

Washington and Moscow, who co-sponsored the sanctions resolution, have dismissed the claims as propaganda.

"The sanctions are political and not economic sanctions -- they do not prohibit private-sector trade and commerce, including the importation of food and medicines into Afghanistan," the US State Department said Thursday.



Anti-Estrada protesters (R) block a group of pro-Estrada demonstrators (L) from joining a pro-Estrada rally in the financial district of Makati yesterday. Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Angelo Reyes, Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado and other top generals joined a mammoth rally against President Joseph Estrada as an opposition leader announced they were resigning.

--AFP photo

Israel, PA closer to peace than ever : Ben Ami

Barak offers 'painful' concessions to Palestinians for peace deal

ANKARA, Jan 19 : Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami said here today that Israel and the Palestinians have never been closer to peace, Anatolia news agency reported, says AFP.

"We are at a very critical point. We have never been so close to peace," he was quoted as saying by Anatolia upon his arrival in Ankara for meetings with Turkish officials.

Ben Ami was scheduled to meet with Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit and President Ahmet Necdet Sezer over the latest developments in the region.

An intensive 10-day round of marathon Israeli-Palestinian talks will kick off in the Egyptian resort of Taba on Sunday, senior Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Qorei told AFP in Jerusalem.

Asked if this new initiative could develop into a summit between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Qorei said "maybe."

However, an Israeli foreign ministry source said Israel would decide whether to accept Arafat's invitation at a meeting of the peace cabinet later Friday.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has offered "painful" concessions to the Palestinians, as both sides seek to reach a peace deal ahead of a presidential election which the polls say Barak will lose.

Barak's move -- a final gambit in his bid to deliver a deal that could swing next month's vote his way -- came Thursday as the latest round of talks with the Palestinians broke up without significant progress.

Despite the talks failure, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat declared himself prepared to engage in a round of intense negotiations in a bid to reach a deal. Most analysts agreed that failure to do so would hand the February 6 election to right-wing Likud opposition leader Ariel Sharon, a man the Palestinians fear will be much more difficult to do business with.

According to a Gallup poll, Likud leader Sharon has 51 percent of popular support against just 31 for Barak.

Barak suggested, in a televised election broadcast Thursday, that a "special authority" for Jerusalem's old city could be set up, with Israel keeping sovereignty over the Jewish area and the Wailing Wall.

He also said the Mount of Olives on the east of the old city, where there is an ancient Jewish cemetery, will stay under "Israeli sovereignty."

He stressed that he will never sign a peace deal that would place the Mosque compound under Palestinian sovereignty" and he repeated his opposition to any recognition of the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

He reaffirmed an agreement for a "withdrawal from more than 90 percent of the West Bank in return for keeping in that territory 80 percent of the settlements" in concentrations of settlements.

Wahid vows to stay in office despite mounting troubles

HONG KONG, Jan 19 : Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid has ruled out resigning early from office and vowed to restore law and order across his sprawling, troubled nation in interviews published today, reports AFP.

"I do not feel threatened at all," Wahid told the South China Morning Post, adding people clamouring for his resignation were the tools of "those hungry for power."

And he told the English-language daily in an interview in Jakarta that he was willing to run for re-election in 2004 if his country needed him.

In another interview with the Japanese Yomiuri Shimbun also published Friday, Wahid said forces both inside and outside the Indonesian parliament were trying to topple his reformist government.

Wahid, Indonesia's first democratically elected president, has come under mounting pressure amid conflicts and separatist movements across the archipelago, mass protests on the streets of Jakarta and a parliamentary investigation into two alleged financial scandals.

TOKYO, Jan 19 : The collective sigh of relief that most of Asia heaved when Republican George W. Bush finally won the White House could turn into a groan of frustration if the new president takes a hard line with China over Taiwan and with Japan over market access, political analysts say, reports Reuters.

Whenever the US and China have tensions, the rest of the region has to bear the brunt of it," commented Melina Nathan of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore.

Manageable relationship

William Overholt, head of regional strategy and economics at Nomura International in Hong Kong, agreed that defence issues could lead to serious differences between Washington and Beijing.

"On the other hand, there's no inherent reason why those differences ought to get out of control," Overholt told Reuters Television.

He said Secretary of State-designate Colin Powell was aware of the challenge which every administration faces of preventing ties with China from sliding into a new Cold War.

"So I think there's a pretty good chance that we'll have a manageable relationship with China," Overholt added.

Rather than in China, the real potential for crises in Asia will be primarily in Indonesia, which

the Clinton administration had handled badly, and in Japan, Overholt argued.

He said the Bush administration was right to emphasise relations with Japan because the country was in deep economic difficulty.

But what Overholt sees as Japan's opposition to Korean unification, plus the difficulty of helping to soothe traditional Sino-Japanese rivalry, represented significant hurdles.

"There are going to be some major issues for the new administration in dealing with the Japanese," Overholt said.

Because Bush's foreign policy advisers have flagged that strategic and diplomatic concerns will be their priority in ties with Japan, some analysts say trade is unlikely to be a regular source of friction.

Bruce Stokes of the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington said Japan is no longer a trade priority for Congress.

"Japan almost never comes up as an issue," he said in Tokyo this week. "Europe is the new bogeyman on Capitol Hill."

But Ronald Morse, a professor at Reitaku University in Chiba near Tokyo, said he expected Bush's designated Trade Repre-

Diana's butler arrested over theft of her belongings

LONDON, Jan 19 : The trusted former butler to Princess Diana has been arrested in connection with the theft of a wedding present given to her by the Emir of Bahrain, police said early today, reports AFP.

Paul Burrell, who worked for Diana for ten years, was arrested at his home in Chester, northwest England and was to be questioned by police later Friday, a Scotland Yard spokesman said.

Burrell was held as part of an investigation into the disappearance of a jewel-encrusted model boat worth 500,000 pounds (700,000 dollars) which was given to Diana when she married Prince Charles in 1981.

It was realised three months ago that the boat had been stolen, when it was discovered on sale in a London antique shop.

The police spokesman said: "A 42-year-old man from the Chester area was arrested on suspicion of theft. He has been remanded in police custody at a police station in Cheshire pending further inquiries."

Ram Temple campaign takes spotlight at Kumbh Mela

ALLAHABAD, India, Jan 19 : The focus of India's Kumbh Mela pilgrimage switched to politics today, as a radical Hindu group prepared to discuss the controversial building of Ram Temple in the northern town of Ayodhya, reports AFP.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Forum - VHP) wants to announce specific dates for building the temple -- dedicated to the Hindu warrior god Ram -- over the ruins of the Babri Mosque, which was demolished by Hindu zealots in 1992.

The announcement is expected to come at the end of a three-day religious summit, beginning at 2:00 pm (14:30 BST) Friday at the Maha Kumbh Mela (Great Kumbh Fair) the world's largest religious gathering near the northern town of Allahabad.

But the VHP's well-laid plans have begun to unravel, with India's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party calling on them to postpone the announcement, and two influential groups of

sadhus (holy men) opting to boycott the summit.

The destruction of the Babri Mosque eight years ago triggered nationwide Hindu-Muslim riots that left thousands dead, and the whole Ayodhya issue remains highly emotive.

The fanatics who tore down the mosque claim it was built on the ruins of a temple marking Ram's birthplace.

In deciding to boycott the summit, the All India Akhara Parishad, an apex body of 13 Sadhu sects, and Bharat Sadhu Samaj (BSS, Indian Sadhus Forum) have accused the VHP of politicising a religious issue, ahead of upcoming state elections.

The sadhu community will not take part ... and will not be bound by the decisions taken there," said BSS General Secretary Swami Hari Narayanand.

Senior Sadhu Mahant Madhwa Acharyaji Maharaj, said the Ram temple should be built, but argued the VHP's confronta-

tional tactics were not the way forward.

"Hindus should learn to protect their religion, but that does not mean they should give up on the basic philosophy of tolerance and start the temple work on a war footing," Maharaj said.

Similar reservations have been expressed by three of India's four "shankaracharyas" -- the country's highest-ranking Hindu priests.

"If some Sadhus have reservations against the religious summit, they should have the guts to come and express their opinion in this gathering," said VHP general secretary Vishwan Hari Dalmia.

"No government will be able to stop us, I can assure you," Dalmia said, when asked to respond to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's appeal to consider the importance of maintaining communal harmony.

The earthquake was the most powerful in the region in years, measuring between 7.6 and 7.9 on the Richter scale, and the death toll is expected to continue rising as many people were still unaccounted for.

Salvadorans start rebuilding with international help

SAN SALVADOR, Jan 19 : Emergency aid began reaching the last pockets of people left homeless and hungry by last weekend's massive earthquake in El Salvador as the government appealed for urgent help to rebuild tens of thousands of destroyed houses, reports AFP.

With the death toll from Saturday's earthquake at nearly 700, environmental blamed greedy construction companies for part of the quake's tragic consequences: the death of 296 people killed when a landslide demolished their houses in the Las Colinas neighborhood west of here.

Food, water and medical supplies reached a number of seriously affected communities that had been cut off by the quake, the government said Thursday in a statement.

The earthquake was the most powerful in the region in years, measuring between 7.6 and 7.9 on the Richter scale, and the death toll is expected to continue rising as many people were still unaccounted for.



Alan Kilshaw, the British father at the centre of a transatlantic feud over the adoption of twins, holds Belinda in the Beaufort Park Hotel, Mold, north Wales on Thursday. The babies were allegedly sold twice over the Internet and the Kilshaw's were accused of having no legal right to the girls.

--AFP photo

Bush family moves in as Clintons depart

WASHINGTON, Jan 19 : George W Bush, wife Laura, and twin daughters Jenna and Barbara move into the White House on Saturday for a stay that promises to be less turbulent than that of the previous occupants, reports AFP.

During the presidential election campaign, President-elect Bush repeatedly said that he intended to "restore dignity" to the White House.

The catch phrase was a clear reference to the Oval Office encounters between outgoing President Bill Clinton and former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

The new administration will be counting on keeping the personal lives of the Bush family off the front pages -- and that applies to the first daughters, Barbara, the blonde and the blond Jenna.

Americans know little about them, even less than they knew about first daughter Chelsea Clinton when she moved in to the White House with her parents eight years ago at age 12.

Clinton outlined "three thoughts about our future" that at times sounded like veiled criticisms of policies outlined by Bush -- whose father, ex-president George Bush, the Democrat defeated in 1992.

First, he urged fiscal responsibility -- a slap at Bush's massive 1.6 trillion dollar tax cut plan -- in order to pay down the national debt, and cope with the strain of retiring baby boomers and from journalists.

The Bush family appeared to be reluctant even to reveal in December that Jenna had been admitted to hospital to undergo surgery for appendicitis in Aus-

tin, Texas.

Jenna is currently a student at the University of Texas while her sister is a student at Yale, her father's alma mater.

For Bush, his daughters figured highly in his deliberations about whether to run for the presidency.

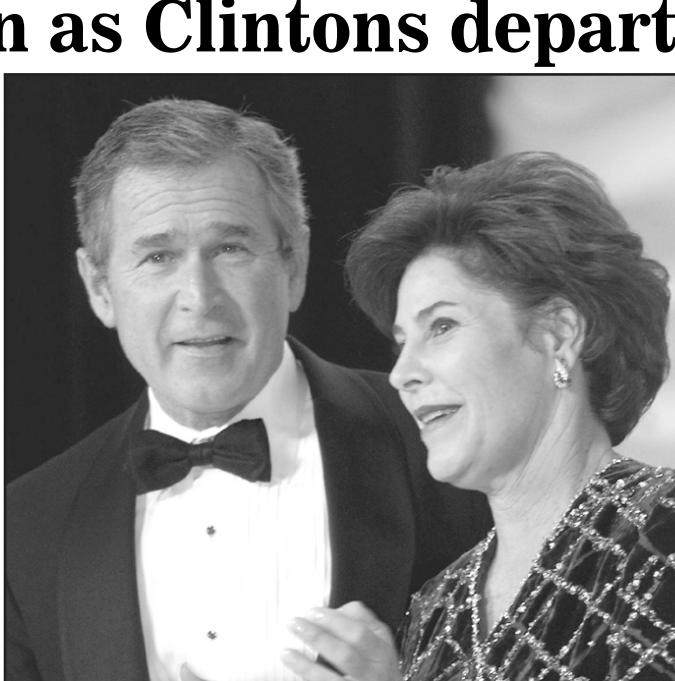
"One of my great hesitations about making this race is I really don't want their lives to be affected by me," Bush said in May, before announcing his White House run.

The president-elect's wife Laura might be even more protective, asking news reporters last week to steer clear of the 19 year olds during their White House stay.

In the interview the Bushes said they are concerned how the young women will deal with the spotlight.

"Our girls are not public figures. They're the children of a president. There will be the hope that they'll have the opportunity to have privacy," said Laura.

"We were very careful not to use them during our campaign -- so that everyone would get the message that they deserve a private life," she said.



US President-elect George W Bush and his wife Laura attend the Candlelight Dinner inside the Washington Hilton, in Washington, DC on Thursday.

Tigers say no to extension of truce, vows to hit back

COLOMBO, Jan 19 : Sri Lanka's