

India disappointed by Pak response to Kashmir ceasefire: Fernandes

BOMBAY, Jan 20 : India's outspoken Defence Minister George Fernandes today said New Delhi was disappointed by Pakistan's response to a ceasefire announced by it in disputed Kashmir, reports AFP.

The defence minister also insisted the Indian government will not offer any time-frame for deciding on a planned trip to Pakistan by Kashmiri separatist leaders, which is currently on hold.

"One is disappointed at the way the Pakistani leadership is looking at it (ceasefire)," Fernandes told reporters after opening a naval housing complex in this western coastal city.

"Until the otherday they (the Pakistani leadership) were talking about Jihad and their commitment to provide training and other aid to militant outfits in Kashmir.

"Today, Pakistan seems unwilling to rein in those (separatist groups) it had earlier let loose."

Fernandes said India had hoped that its unilateral suspension of military action against the anti-Indian rebels would get the two South Asian rivals to the negotiating table.

"The ceasefire is holding completely and totally as far as the Line of Control (in Kashmir) is concerned. Troops on both sides of the border are staring down at each other.

"In so far as the situation in Kashmir is concerned, there hasn't been any great let up in the activities of some of the militant outfits such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hizbul Mujahedeen and others," Fernandes said.

Most pro-Pakistan guerrilla forces have rejected the Indian ceasefire, warning that they will instead intensify raids in Kashmir.

Fernandes's comments came two days after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said the ball was in Pakistan's court to create a cordial atmosphere leading up to peace talks between the two sides.

Vajpayee said Islamabad's support to cross-border militancy, especially in Kashmir, were major impediments to peace, adding that a spurt in violence in Kashmir, following the ceasefire from November-end, was Islamabad's handiwork.

A 53-year-old row over Kash-

mir has caused two of the three wars between India and Pakistan since their independence from British colonial rule in 1947.

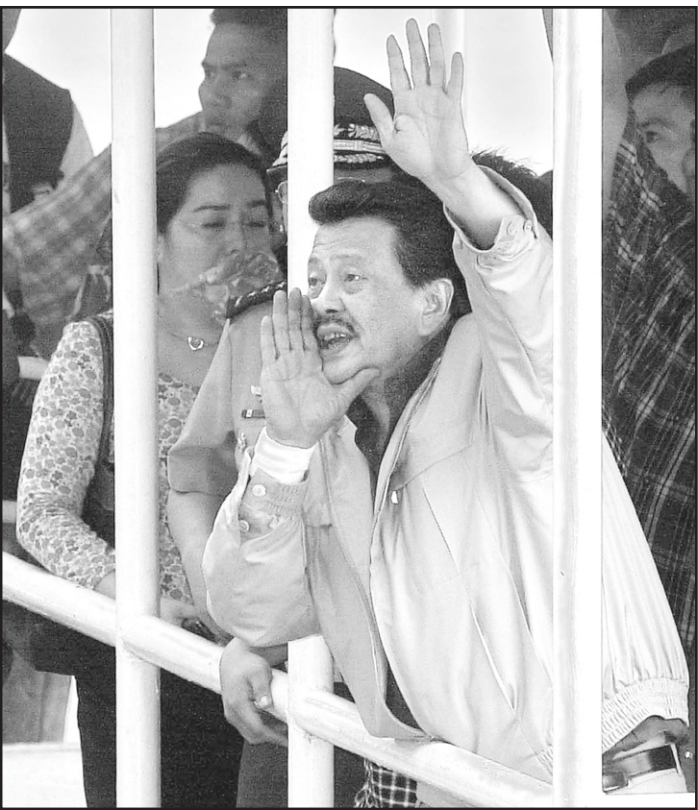
An ongoing separatist campaign in Indian Kashmir has left more than 34,000 people dead over the past 12 years.

India blames Pakistan for fomenting the Muslim insurgency, and has linked talks with Pakistan to a halt in what it calls cross-border "terrorism."

Islamabad, which holds the northern third of Kashmir, denies the allegations but provides moral and diplomatic support to the separatists.

In Bombay, defence minister Fernandes also said any extension to the ceasefire, set to end January 26, would depend on how Islamabad responded to Vajpayee's demand that it rein in the militant groups that have been "trained, equipped, financed and pushed into our country."

Fernandes, speaking of the planned trip by Kashmiri separatist leaders of the All-Party Hurriyat Conference to Pakistan, said the event was under the consideration of the government.



Ousted Philippine president Joseph 'Erap' Estrada waves to supporters from a ferry yesterday in Manila after leaving Malacanang Palace to cross the Pasig River to Malacanang Park. Estrada vacated the presidential palace with his family after his desperate bid to cling on to power collapsed and his Vice President Gloria Arroyo was installed in power. --AFP photo

World leaders pledge support to Arroyo

HONG KONG, Jan 20 : The United States was relieved and Japan pledged its support as world leaders recognised Gloria Arroyo as the next president of the Philippines, reports AFP.

Arroyo, who Saturday took the oath as Philippines president, vowed to wipe out corruption and poverty adding: "I feel God put me in this point of our history and there is hard work ahead."

The United States expressed relief the crisis was settled peacefully and "in accordance with democratic and constitutional procedures."

In a statement issued by the US embassy in Manila, Washington said it had "an exceptionally strong working relationship" with Arroyo and that it was looking forward to working with her in the future.

As a student of Georgetown University in Washington DC, Arroyo was a classmate of outgoing US President Bill Clinton.

The embassy also thanked Joseph Estrada for his efforts to bring relations with the US closer during his two-and-a-half years in power.

Estrada earlier succumbed to massive opposition rallies -- spurred on by the desertion of his cabinet and military chiefs -- and quit his office, leaving Arroyo as his constitutional successor.

It was the Philippines second bloodless uprising in 15 years, dubbed People Power II. A similar movement ended the 20-year rule of dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 and is commemorated by the Roman Catholic shrine where the anti-Estrada protest was centered.

Japan welcomed Arroyo as the new president and pledged to support and work closely with the 53-year-old economist and her new administration.

"Japan expects the new government under President Arroyo to be launched smoothly," Japanese Foreign Minister Yohei Kono said in a statement.

"To further strengthen friendship and cooperation between Japan and the Philippines, the government of Japan will continue to closely cooperate with the new government under President Arroyo," Kono said.

In Bangkok, the Thai foreign ministry said Estrada's ousting was in accordance with the democratic process of the Philippines and was in line with the will of the majority of people.



Petition for stripping Sharif of nationality

ISLAMABAD, Jan 20 : A petition seeking the cancellation of exiled former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistani nationality has been moved by a citizen at a High Court, reports said today, says AFP.

The petitioner, Iqbal Haider, has asked for Sharif be stripped of his nationality because he chose "to enjoy a life in exile" in Saudi Arabia neglecting his duty to the state, The News daily reported.

The Lahore High Court on Friday ordered the government and Sharif's nephew Hamza Shahbaz to appear before it on January 31 in connection with the petition.

Sharif, ousted in a coup in October 1999, was exiled along with 19 close relatives last month.

Bush urged to salvage ME peace

GAZA, Jan 20 : The Palestinian leadership has called for US President-elect George Bush to push through a "real relaunch of the peace process" in the Middle East after he takes office today, reports AFP.

"We call on the new US president, George W Bush, for a real relaunch of the peace process on the basis of UN resolutions ... and on the basis on the peace principles set out at the (1991) Madrid treaty stipulating the exchange of land for peace," the leadership said in a statement issued Friday.

After its weekly meeting in Gaza the leadership said it hoped to establish "solid relations with

the new US administration, in the interest of the United States."

The statement went on to praise the regional efforts of outgoing President Bill Clinton.

"We are still in favour of continuing talks, the Palestinian people have chosen the path of peace through peaceful negotiations, because the deadlock in talks cannot help peace, or regional security," the Palestinians added.

Meanwhile, peace prospects hung in the balance Friday, with Israel delaying its response to a Palestinian proposal for 10 days of marathon talks while Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben Ami said the two sides have never

Court orders Hinduja brothers to face questioning in Bofors scandal

NEW DELHI, Jan 20 : An Indian court today ordered three brothers of the London-based Hinduja business empire to appear before federal detectives probing a 1986 bribery scandal involving the Swedish Bofors arms firm, reports AFP.

Judge Ajit Barihoke asked the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which has charged the Hindujas in the scandal, to interrogate the three billionaire Indians beginning later Saturday.

"If need be, the interrogation would continue tomorrow and the day after during working hours," Barihoke told brothers Srichand, Gopichand and Prakash Hinduja in court.

The three are charged with accepting money from Bofors to help clinch a 1.3-billion-dollar gun deal in India.

On Friday, the judge granted bail to the three but ordered them not to leave India without permission.

Soon after the judge's order, the brothers moved an application seeking Barihoke's permission to go abroad.

The CBI in a U-turn on its previous stand said Saturday the three should surrender their passports and remain in India.

Counsel for Hindujas, Rajinder Singh, opposed the CBI's petition.

"The mere fact that the three

New Philippine President Arroyo --a petite woman with big ideas

MANILA, Jan 20 : Gloria Arroyo, the new Philippine President, is a petite convent-bred economist with ambitious goals, reports AFP.

The 53-year-old daughter of a former president was sworn in Saturday, the same day the United States -- on whose constitution the Manila government is largely modelled -- was swearing in its 43rd president, George W. Bush, who also has a former president for a father.

Arroyo will have to race to achieve her key goals of eradicating poverty and wiping out graft, a scourge which her predecessor Joseph Estrada was charged with and which led to his fall from grace Saturday.

She will serve out the remaining three-and-a-half years of Estrada's six-year term but after that, a general election will decide the next president.

"I feel God put me in this point of our history and there is hard work ahead," the US-educated economist told a news conference after being sworn in by Supreme Court chief justice Hilario Davide at a historic Christian shrine where thousands of Filipinos had been staging rallies calling for Estrada's ouster.

She could also seek a fresh six-year term in the polls after completing the remainder of

Estrada's mandate.

As a student of Georgetown University, in Washington DC, Arroyo was a classmate of outgoing US President Bill Clinton.

A deeply religious Christian, Arroyo has vowed to wipe out corruption in the presidency but

Her other objectives are to improve "moral standards" in the government, replace the traditional politics of personality and patronage with politics of consultations and leadership by example.

"The crying need of the hour is morality at the top or to put it conversely, the many and diverse problems plaguing (our) country and people today stem from the lack or disregard for morality at the very corridors of power," she said.

The president and vice president in the Philippines are elected separately, allowing Arroyo to serve as Estrada's vice president even though they were from different parties.

Arroyo was in her early teens when her late father Diosdado Macapagal was elected president in 1961.

"I believe in a very strong work ethic. I believe in a dignified lifestyle I believe that rhetoric should be matched by action and performance is more important than grandstanding," she said.

Arroyo graduated with top honours from Manila's Assumption College, run by Roman Catholic nuns.

She says she toes the church line "on almost all of the political issues with a moral dimension."



Gloria Arroyo

promised there would be no witch-hunt.

She said she would push four "core" goals, with a priority on eradicating poverty in the resource-rich archipelago of 76 million people within this decade.

ULFA rejects Delhi's offer for talks

GUWAHATI, India, Jan 20 : An outlawed separatist group in India's northeastern state of Assam has rejected the federal government's offer for unconditional peace talks, newspapers here reported today, says AFP.

The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), Assam's frontline militant group fighting for a homeland in the oil-rich state, said the government's offer was "unacceptable."

"The offer by the home ministry is humiliating as the officials have said the main issue of Assamese sovereignty could be negotiated only when we come

for a dialogue," the newspapers quoted the ULFA statement as saying Saturday.

"The question of sovereignty cannot be compromised at any cost," the statement, signed by ULFA chief Arabinda Rajkhowa and the outfit's military chief Paresh Baruah, said.

On Wednesday, a top Indian interior ministry official announced that New Delhi was ready for talks with the ULFA and was even prepared to discuss the issue of sovereignty with its leadership "anywhere in the world."

"We want to first see the out-

Pinochet to face judge for first time

SANTIAGO, Jan 20 : Chile's Augusto Pinochet will face off Tuesday against the crusading judge who has sought to charge the ailing former dictator for alleged human rights abuses committed during his 17-year rule, reports AFP.

Pinochet will appear Tuesday as ordered before Judge Juan Guzman to answer questions concerning his actions after taking power in a bloody coup in September 1973, his lawyer said.

The 85-year-old Pinochet insists he is innocent of all charges relating to the estimated 3,000 people who disappeared or were killed during his rule from 1973 to 1990.

Annan in China with reform, HR on agenda

BEIJING, Jan 20 : UN Secretary General Kofi Annan arrived in Beijing Saturday to begin talks with Chinese leaders on UN reform, human rights and China's participation in UN peacekeeping operations, reports AFP.

"I have come to Beijing to hold discussions with Chinese authorities on UN-related issues, some of the crises that we are dealing with and UN reform," Annan told journalists on arrival.

Annan, on his fourth visit to China since becoming the head of the UN, will meet with Vice Premier Qian Qichen and Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan on Sunday, before holding talks with President Jiang Zemin on Monday.

Afghans urged to pray for rains

KABUL, Jan 20 : Afghan Taliban leader Mulla Mohammad Omar has called on the people to offer prayers for rainfall on three consecutive days, a statement, broadcast by state-radio, said today, reports AFP.

"All countrymen are requested to offer Istisqaa prayers for three days starting from Saturday so that God the Almighty sends rain of blessing to our drought-hit country," he said.

Afghan farmers have already warned of widespread famine next spring as winter rains had failed to break a devastating drought in time for the crucial harvest season.



US President George W Bush (C), holding wife Laura's hand (L), points to his personalised boots as they arrive on stage at the Texas State Black Tie and Boot Ball at the Marriott Wardman Park on Friday in Washington, DC. Vice President Dick Cheney and his wife Lynne are in background. --AFP photo

Saudi, Indian FM's sign cooperation accord

RIYADH, Jan 20 : Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and his Saudi counterpart, Prince Saud al-Faisal, held talks on boosting economic ties and on the Palestinian uprising against Israel, the official news agency SPA said today, reports AFP.

They also reviewed efforts to boost political ties and signed an accord on "cooperation and coordination" between their ministries, at the meeting late Friday in the Saudi capital, SPA said.

The accord "will permit the two countries to exchange views on regional and international issues of common interest," according to India's ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Tamilz Ammed.

"The peace process in the Middle East and the savage killings carried out by Israel against innocent Palestinian civilians" were at the centre of the talks between Prince Saud and Singh, SPA reported.

It said the two ministers called for Israel "to respect the bases of the Madrid (peace) conference and the relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council founded

on the principle of land for peace."

Singh arrived Friday on the first visit by an Indian foreign minister to the kingdom, which hosts a major Indian community but is a key ally of India's arch-rival, Pakistan.

He is also expected to sign an agreement with Saudi Arabia on drug trafficking.

The more than one million Indians who work in Saudi Arabia make up the oil-rich Gulf state's largest expatriate population, sending home nearly four billion dollars a year in remittances.

India also buys 25 percent of its oil from Saudi Arabia.

But the kingdom, the keeper of Islam's two holiest shrines, has strong relations with Pakistan, supplying Islamabad with nearly a billion dollars in economic aid over the past few years.

Former Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who is now living in exile in Saudi Arabia, said in July 1999 that Riyadh played an "important" role in the resolution of India and Pakistan's conflict over Kashmir.

Court believes Gorbelaar Terim crisis

Fiorentian get serious Radebe raises the stakes Ferreira's misfortune